The Aesthetics of Tyranny
African Dictatorships and the Work of Criticism

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Abstract

Proceeding through a series of case studies centred on the representation of African dictatorships, this work re-examines the relationship between the political and the aesthetic in current approaches to postcolonial themes. The texts analysed are in French and in English, and range across literature, film and social science. Following a number of recent interventions in the field of postcolonial criticism which have placed renewed emphasis on the aesthetic and the literary, this thesis questions the nature of the political resistance that critics sometimes ascribe to certain aesthetic practices.

However, contrary to recent analyses which have construed the future of postcolonial criticism as an alternative between a 'political turn' and an 'aesthetic turn' (for example Bongie 2008 & 2010), my thesis contests the notion that criticism can only be legitimized by either an evaluative conception of aesthetics or a commitment to progressive politics. Instead, this work argues for a form of criticism that would place the complexity of aesthetic experiences at the heart of its investigations, and shows how representations of African dictatorships offer a privileged opportunity to understand the mutual embeddedness of the political and the aesthetic. In this way, I hope both to intervene in current methodological debates animating postcolonial studies and other forms of politicized criticism, and to offer new insights into a major topic in post-independence African literature and in representations of Africa more generally.

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Contents

Introduction

Following the emergence of a number of politicized fields such as postcolonial, queer, or feminist studies, politics and aesthetics have increasingly been seen as antagonistic concerns in the practice of literary and cultural criticism. Focusing on a series of case studies centred on the representation of African dictatorships, this thesis will question this opposition by showing how political approaches to texts often rely on an unacknowledged investment in the aesthetic. I will take as a starting point a series of theoretical debates that have emerged in the field of postcolonial criticism in order to explore the contradictory, and often incompatible, pressures that define current approaches to political themes. I will insist, following a number of recent interventions, on the heterogeneity between the aesthetic or literary subversions celebrated by critics and the political resistance that they are often said to constitute. However, my argument contests the notion that critical interpretations can only be legitimized by either an evaluative conception of aesthetics or a commitment to progressive politics, because both ideas fail to do justice to the reality of aesthetic experience. Instead, I will argue that a deeper awareness of the relation between these different concerns – which on some levels fail to coincide, and on others, intersect in complex ways – should be central to the practice of criticism.

The theme of post-independence dictatorships in Africa offers an ideal focus to examine these issues. The topic is illustrative of themes and questions which have been central to the field of postcolonial criticism, and mobilizes very directly the entanglement between politics and aesthetics that is central to my argument. Dictatorship is not only an explicitly political theme, but the phenomenon itself also implies a very concrete politicization of arts and literature, through the use of censorship and propaganda. Moreover, the continuities between the forms of colonial domination and of dictatorial oppression in many African countries, as well as the close ties between African despots and ex-colonial powers (particularly in the case of

the infamous 'Françafrique'), constitute a potent example of the complex relations between the colonial and post-colonial eras, which have come to infuse the 'post' in 'postcolonial' with multiple and conflicting meanings.[1] Such a subject thus seems to confer an immediate political relevance to the works that deal with it.

Accordingly, in a previous work about filmic and literary representations of African dictatorships, Mariama Baldé argued that these representations, because of their subject matter, are necessarily 'anti-despotic':

> Les auteurs qui ont représenté le dictateur africain défient la loi du parti unique en sortant du schéma de la voix unique et de l'unique expression. Leurs œuvres s'opposent d'emblée au régime qu'ils figurent. Parce qu'elles posent une interrogation bannie, font entendre des voix étouffées, lèvent le voile sur ce qui est caché, profanent ce qui est sacralisé et revalorisent ce qui a été avili, ces œuvres sont d'entrée de jeu anti-despotiques.[2]

This could be understood in several ways. On a first level, many of the works produced about African dictatorships contain an explicit or veiled criticism of these regimes, and it may seem legitimate to describe them as 'anti-despotic' on this account. However, it seems that Baldé also implies that the works possess an oppositional value in a stronger sense: she depicts literary and filmic representations of dictatorship as a form of counter-censorship, and as a means to retrieve the questions and voices dictatorial regimes have repressed. The phrasing suggests that novels and films about dictatorship constitute an actual challenge to the real dictatorial regimes on which their (predominantly fictional) subjects have been modelled. The desire to transcend the distinction between reality and fiction in order to make claims for the political significance of texts is, I think, central to the attraction of the topic and, as I will examine in Chapter 1, some writers have skilfully capitalized on this urge. However, the rest of this thesis will question the assumptions that underlie this sort of approach: many of these works would be

[1]See for instance the recent synthetic account of postcolonialism in Jane Hiddleston, *Understanding Postcolonialism* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009), pp. 1-5. In the following pages I use the hyphenated version 'post-colonial' as a chronological marker, in order to refer to the era that followed formal colonization. I use the term 'postcolonial' to refer to the complex, multi-directional relations that link the colonial and the post-colonial periods, and to the body of theoretical and critical works which examine these relations.

[2] Mariama Samba Baldé Cissé, 'Le Dictateur d'Afrique noire dans la littérature et le cinéma francophones de 1963 à 2000. Une analyse des représentations' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Saint-Denis: Université Paris VIII- Saint Denis, 2007), p. 685.

deeply oppositional and subversive within the universe they describe, but in spite of Baldé's insistence on immediacy ('d'emblée', 'd'entrée de jeu'), there is no reason to assume that their (fictional) universe will coincide with the actual context of either their production or their reception.

Furthermore, the ways in which we, as critics, come to interpret this supposedly 'anti-despotic' dimension are situated and inflected by our own situation in wider political contexts that do not necessarily coincide with the dictatorial situation to which the texts refer. In his pioneering study on the status of art in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Republic, entitled *Art Under a Dictatorship*, Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt suggested that dictators are actually more insightful than democratic leaders when it comes to assessing the significance of art:

> One of the reasons so many people find it difficult to take these things seriously is an ingrained indifference to art, a traditional reluctance to accept art as a direct social force of extraordinary magnitude. The dictators in authoritarian states have understood this fact far more promptly and more thoroughly than any of the leaders of democratic societies.[3]

In Lehmann-Haupt's account, dictatorship is a regime in which the critic is no longer isolated in his or her concern with art, and where critics' own belief in its 'subversive' and 'radical' nature is shared by the highest authorities. Thus, according to Lehmann-Haupt, the modern dictator 'does not think of arts as a luxury or a pastime, a pleasant embellishment of life' but 'has a very healthy respect' for it.[4] My own approach to this topic will suggest that the political dimension of art or literature is not actually 'understood' by dictators, but in fact shaped, and even produced, by these regimes, whereas the 'reluctance' of democracies to treat art as a political matter is partly linked to the kind of freedom that art and artists are granted (which is also political, albeit in a different way). Art or literature can certainly be 'subversive' in a democratic context, but probably not for the same reasons or in quite the same way as in a dictatorship. For instance, those conceptions of literature that insist on its polysemy, ambiguity, or inexhaustibility of meaning as forms of resistance to dominant meanings and discourses are inscribed within a more general context,

[3] Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. xviii.

[4] Ibid., p. xviii.

where the literary text is recognized as somehow exceptional and, because its meaning can never be contained by one given interpretation, partly exempted from the responsibilities and liabilities of other discourses.[5] However, these interpretations are not necessarily those that would lead these texts to be censored by actual dictatorial regimes. In many cases, these works would not be read as 'literature' or 'art' in the way I have just described, but directly made accountable for their political 'message'.[6] Therefore, instead of a celebration of the supposed radicality or subversiveness of the works under discussion, this thesis will carry out a critical analysis of our desire to seek such qualities. In the following pages, I will take my own attempt to treat the subject of African dictatorships and, more precisely, my own impulse to examine a political theme through a series of primarily fictional and artistic representations, as a test case for the tensions or even contradictions that define postcolonial and other forms of politicized criticism. This will lead to an argument about the importance of aesthetic experience to the work of criticism, even when it is concerned with a topic as obviously political as dictatorship.

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[5] My understanding of this link between a certain form of democratic freedom of expression, the institution of literature and its ambiguous 'irresponsibility' is partly inspired by Derrida's reflexions in '"This Strange Institution Called Literature". An Interview with Jacques Derrida [1989]', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75 (p. 38).

[6] For instance, in a discussion of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* Oliver Lovesey supports his approach by referring to Ngũgĩ's arrest and imprisonment by the Kenyan authorities in December 1977. Lovesey argues that in breaking the 'fourth wall' and in including the audience, the play performed a metaphorical subversion of the national space: 'Every night of its [*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*'s] brief run, the audience broke the conceptual fourth wall separating audience and actors, and they sang and danced inside and outside the theater, breaking out of the enclosed free space of the theater and, in the state's view, challenging its control of national space. The punishment for violating the state's control of space was Ngugi's imprisonment and exile'. Oliver Lovesey, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Postnation: The Cultural Geographies of Colonial, Neocolonial, and Postnational Space', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 48 (2002), 139-168 (pp. 149-150). In this passage, Lovesey is invoking Ngũgĩ's persecution by the state to confer a direct political import to his interpretation of Ngũgĩ's 'defamiliarization'. In reality, the persecution of Ngũgĩ was not the direct consequence of this particular play, which was written in English and performed at the Kenya National Theatre, in front of a mostly middle-class audience, but happened after the prohibition of his 1977 play *I Will Marry When I Want*, which was in Gikuyu, was produced in the countryside and involved rural populations in the performances. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* was indeed controversial, but not in the way Lovesey's interpretation suggests: according to Simon Gikandi, 'when [*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*] was produced at the National Theatre in Nairobi in 1976, opposition toward it did not come from the Kenyatta government, but from established settler interests who tried to stifle it using their powerful connections in the office of the Attorney General'. Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 183. In attributing his own analysis of the play to the state, Lovesey probably overemphasized the political relevance of his own concern for Ngũgĩ's subversion of the aesthetics of drama, and ignored elements which were probably more essential for the government, such as the identity of the audience.

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Dictators have figured abundantly in representations of Africa after independence and have inspired many works of literature.[7] In the Francophone field, one could mention numerous examples, such as Alioum Fantouré's *Le Cercle des tropiques* (1972), Sony Labou Tansi's famous novels *La Vie et demie* (1979) and *L'Etat honteux* (1981), Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire* (1982), Doumbi Fakoly's *La Retraite anticipée du Guide Suprême* (1984), Aminata Sow Fall's *L'Ex-Père de la Nation* (1987), or Ahmadou Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), as well as several plays, including Maxime N'Débéka's *Le Président* (1970) and Tchicaya U Tam'si's *Le Destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku, prince qu'on sort* (1979). Comparably, in the Anglophone field the theme has been addressed by a number of prominent writers, among whom are Nurrudin Farah (the trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, which is composed of the novels *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1985)), Chinua Achebe (*Anthills of the Savannah* (1986)), Wole Soyinka (*A Play of Giants* (1984) and *King Baabu* (2001)) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (*Wizard of the Crow* (2006)).

African dictators and dictatorships have also been the subject of a number of films, particularly documentaries (such as Barbet Schroeder's *Général Idi Amin Dada: Autoportrait* (1974), Werner Herzog's *Echoes from a Somber Empire* (1990), Thierry Michel's *Mobutu, Roi du Zaïre* (1999) or, more recently, Lucy Bailey and Andrew Thompson's *Mugabe and the White African* (2009)), but also fiction films by African filmmakers (notably Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda's *Le Damier, Papa national, Oyé!* (1996)) as well as American or European directors (among the most successful, Sydney Pollack's *The Interpreter* (2005), and Kevin MacDonald's *The Last King of Scotland* (2006)). In addition, African dictators have been widely depicted and parodied in popular culture. One may think for instance of the appearance of the fictional dictator Dibala in the sixth season of the medical TV

[7] Lydie Moudileno describes it as a '*topos*' of post-independence African literature. Lydie Moudileno, *Parades postcoloniales: la fabrication des identités dans le roman congolais* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), p. 59.

show *House* (2009), or of the Simpsons episode 'Simpson Safari' (2001), in which the family travels to an African country officially called 'Pepsi Presents New Zanzibar', ruled by the dictator Muntu, who just 'seized power in a bloodless coup – all smothering'.[8] The prevalence of the theme makes it hard to delimit the corpus of dictatorship novels or films as it appears in the background of many works, as well as in many representations of the continent, which do not necessarily take dictatorship as their main topic. This difficulty is made even greater by the fact that the phenomenon itself is hard to define: dictatorship is an extremely vague political category and also a polemical one, which has been applied to very heterogeneous political regimes. In this introduction and in the rest of the thesis, I am therefore focusing on a few significant examples, in which the theme is absolutely central and where the regimes depicted are explicitly described as dictatorial.

In addition to a significant number of articles and studies dedicated to specific works or authors, representations of African dictatorships have been the object of three monographs.[9] These monographs have offered comprehensive accounts of the image of the dictator as it emerges from their respective corpuses (mostly centred on Francophone writings) and have successfully identified recurring thematic and formal features. But they have paid little attention to what will be at the centre of my own discussion, namely the relation between the aesthetic dimension of the texts and their political subject matter. For instance, in the most recent of these works, Mamadou Kalidou Ba's *Le Roman africain francophone post-colonial* (2009), the two aspects are considered but neatly separated:

> Ainsi, à travers un corpus de onze romans écrits par dix auteurs issus de sept nationalités différentes en Afrique francophone, l'on envisage d'étudier d'abord les caractéristiques psychiques du dictateur, les fondements de l'exercice de son pouvoir, ensuite les réalités cachées de l'iceberg que constituent les régimes oligarchiques africains, avant de terminer par les options narratives et la satire qui se dégage de l'attitude des narrateurs face aux tyrans. Ce travail qui se veut une sorte de radioscopie des dictatures dépeintes par les romanciers

[8] Mark Kirkland, 'Simpson Safari', *The Simpsons* (Fox, 2001).

[9] Koffi Anyinefa, *Littérature et politique en Afrique noire: socialisme et dictature comme thèmes du roman congolais d'expression française* (Bayreuth: Eckhard Breitinger/Bayreuth University, 1990); Baldé Cissé; Mamadou Kalidou Ba, *Le Roman africain francophone post-colonial: radioscopie de la dictature à travers une narration hybride* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

> africains francophones de la "seconde génération" a aussi l'ambition de mettre en exergue leur génie littéraire qui se manifeste dans l'esthétique qui caractérise leurs œuvres.[10]

As announced in this passage, the texts are first subjected to a broadly documentary approach which uses the concepts of psychology and political science, and only then examined as aesthetic objects. Besides, although Ba insists that the literary character of the texts calls for specific attention to their formal and narrative aspects, it seems that this literariness has no impact on Ba's project to use these novels as documentary sources. Thus Ba's first chapter, which offers a psychological diagnosis of the predominantly fictional dictators of his corpus, is motivated by the necessity to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms of real dictatorial regimes:

> Il paraît donc nécessaire, pour mieux décrypter les systèmes dictatoriaux basés sur la volonté unilatérale d'un homme, de voir dans la personnalité de celui-ci ce qui l'incite à adopter un type particulier de comportement. La position "avant-gardiste" de ce chapitre est donc avant tout motivée par la nécessité de faciliter la compréhension des mécanismes de la dictature.[11]

Throughout his study, Ba constantly reaffirms the continuity between the fictional portrayals offered by African novelists and the real-life figures on which they are modelled ('les romanciers négro-africains des "soleils des indépendances" exagèrent très peu lorsqu'ils dépeignent des dictateurs mégalomanes aspirant à la surhumanité') and, surprisingly, the possibility of gaining reliable knowledge of actual postcolonial dictatorships from a reading of these (fictional) texts is never seriously challenged.[12] My aim, however, is not to oppose the naiveté of this approach with proclamations about the alleged self-referentiality of all literature. On the contrary, I believe that Ba's impulsion to link novels about dictatorship to the political realities they evoke should be taken seriously, and that the desire to gain an understanding of these regimes constitutes a legitimate reason to get interested in these texts. But this issue cannot be examined in isolation from the literariness that Ba relegates to the end of his study. In the following chapters, I will therefore try to bring together the two dimensions that Ba keeps separated, and to examine the interconnections between the

[10] Ba, p. 13.

[11] Ba, p. 17.

[12] Ibid., p. 20.

aesthetic and the impulse toward political realities in the representation of African dictatorships.

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In placing an emphasis on these issues, my work follows a number of recent works which have called for a re-examination of the relationship between politics and aesthetics in postcolonial criticism. On the face of it, postcolonial criticism, like a number of other politicized fields, seems to displace the focus of critical attention away from the aesthetic and towards the political. The institutionalization of the field and the inclusion of postcolonial literatures in the academic curriculum have been achieved not only through a reconsideration of 'Eurocentric' aesthetic hierarchies, but also through a radical critique of the aesthetic itself, and more precisely of the notion of aesthetic autonomy. Thus, in his widely influential studies *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said challenged existing conceptions of literary autonomy by exposing the complicity of canonical works of literature with imperialist domination. This defiance of postcolonial criticism towards a certain notion of the aesthetic means not only that canonical texts can no longer be exempted from political and ideological scrutiny in the name of aesthetic value, but that the aesthetic in general has become increasingly suspected of offering a convenient alibi for the marginalization of non-canonical, 'non-Western' cultural productions and for the propagation of imperialist ideas. As Elleke Boehmer notes, a phrase such as 'postcolonial aesthetic' has come to represent 'a contradiction in terms; even an oxymoron'.[13] This has had important effects on the general rhetoric of the field: as Ato Quayson and Theo Goldberg argue, postcolonial criticism is not organized around a distinctive methodology but articulated around a number of extra-textual referents, such as (neo-)colonial domination, or migration and exile, which provide its 'enabling pre-text' and orient the way texts are approached.[14] Thus

[13] Elleke Boehmer, 'A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating Upon the Present', in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 170-181 (p. 170).

[14] *Relocating Postcolonialism*, ed. by David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. xii.

Stephen Slemon in his essay 'The Scramble for Post-Colonialism' could assert vigorously: 'I believe that post-colonial studies needs always to remember that its referent in the real world is a form of political, economic, and discursive oppression whose name, first and last, is *colonialism*'.[15] As Quayson and Goldberg suggest, a consequence of this political emphasis is that the analyses of postcolonial critics are often 'proffered as attempts at rectifying disorders in the extra-textual world of social relations'.[16] In other words, the legitimacy of the field appears to be founded on the political project it supports, rather than on the aesthetic value of the objects it studies.

But in spite of this apparent rejection of the aesthetic in favour of politics, the fact remains that a significant proportion of postcolonial critics still tend to privilege either canonical European texts or 'cosmopolitan' and highly 'literary' postcolonial works in their analyses. This has sometimes been perceived as a contradiction and a weakness. Indeed, if one is primarily interested in culture because of its ideological and political influence, there is no obvious rationale for focusing on literary texts, especially 'canonical' works, as their audience is somewhat limited compared to that of, say, 'airport' novels and popular TV shows.[17] Even those disciplines which, like cultural studies, focus on non-canonical cultural productions still have to contend with the fact that if one is primarily interested in correcting political injustice and promoting progressive political agendas, it is not clear that any kind of expert cultural interpretation is a priority, compared with actual political activism.[18] The marginalization of criticism as a political discourse is determined by larger historical,

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[15] Stephen Slemon, 'The Scramble for Post-Colonialism', in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, ed. by Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 15-32 (p. 31).

[16] Goldberg and Quayson, p. xii.

[17] This issue was raised by Chris Bongie in his essay 'Exiles on Main Stream' (2003), which examines the 'failed dialogue' between the field of postcolonial literary studies and that of cultural studies.Chris Bongie, 'Exiles on Main Stream: Valuing the Popularity of Postcolonial Literature', *Postmodern Culture*, 14 (2003) <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v014/14.1bongie.html> [accessed 22 February 2010].

[18] Although this legacy constitutes an important source of anxiety, much work in cultural studies relies on analytical tools and theories that are directly derived from literary criticism, as is particularly well exemplified by the influence of semiotic theory in the field. As Rita Felski writes: 'To confuse an interest in popular culture with a sociological stress on content is to mistake the essence of the cultural studies project. […] By training their eye on works once dismissed as aesthetically unworthy, cultural critics challenged the opposition between formally sophisticated high art and content-driven mass culture. It now seems obvious that many popular forms, from rap music to sitcoms, from science fiction novels to slasher movies, rely on a sophisticated manipulation of stylistic conventions'. Rita Felski, 'The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies', in *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, ed. by Michael Bérubé (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 28-43 (p. 33).

cultural and political factors that are largely independent of critics' own choice of topics or emphasis.[19] These have to do for instance with the institutional setting in which much literary or cultural criticism is pursued, which implies that the circulation of these works often remains confined to a limited, academic audience, which shares certain specialized vocabularies. This situation is itself linked to wider social conceptions and assumptions concerning the role of literature and art in relation to politics.

All this suggests that in spite of its politicized rhetoric, postcolonial criticism, in so far as it still mostly deals with literary/aesthetic objects and methods of interpretation, cannot easily be justified by its impact as a political activity. Nicholas Harrison thus points out in a recent article that Said's persistent attachment to high culture and canonical literature 'raises unanswered questions – and doubts – about the relative significance of canonical texts, in their ideological impact, compared with numerous other texts and non-textual factors'.[20] Indeed, even when it explicitly privileges political over aesthetic/literary concerns, the work that is carried out by postcolonial critics remains inextricably invested in the aesthetic value of literature (a fact that Said appears to have been less reluctant to admit than many other practitioners in the field). Criticism is a practice which presupposes that the cultural products on which it focuses have a specific value (distinct from its social utility, for instance), and that in consequence, works of art or literature must be the object of specific modes of attention (which often focus on 'form'), distinct from other reading and interpretive practices. Its procedures are not only enabled or motivated by the 'aesthetic' value of the objects it studies, but also constitute a means to 'actualize' and reveal this value, which is already assumed to exist, and tacitly or explicitly justifies critics' interpretations. The same goes for a practice like postcolonial criticism, whose contestation of the distinctiveness of the aesthetic is in fact implicitly organized around it. This inevitable dependency of politicized forms of criticism on the very notion of the aesthetic that they seek to challenge is well captured by John Guillory: 'If Shakespeare's plays, for example, can be received or

[19] This argument was provocatively developed by Stanley Eugene Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), p. 51.

[20] Nicholas Harrison, '"A Roomy Place Full of Possibility": Said's *Orientalism* and the Literary', in *New Essays on Edward Said*, ed. by Ranjan Ghosh (New York; London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 3-18 (p. 8).

"used" as moral exempla for adolescent schoolchildren, as monuments of nationalist pride, as the cultural capital of the educated classes, they are only capable of these "nonaesthetic" uses *because* they are classified as (canonical) works of art'.[21] Likewise, whether postcolonial critics choose to engage with this aspect or not, the potential value of their analyses in detecting political complicities or subversions in the works they study is tied to the value implicitly attributed to art or literature, i.e. to the aesthetic.

These arguments were recently extended by Eli Sorensen's study *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary*, which explores not only the implicit investment of postcolonial criticism in the aesthetic value of literature, but exposes some of the manoeuvres through which this investment has been given a political significance. According to Sorensen, the field is organized around what he calls a 'modernist ethos', through which postcolonial critics perform a '"tacit", allegorizing leap' between a modernist and somewhat confined conception of literary and political resistance, relying on 'the uncritical assumption that a set of politically subversive concepts corresponds to formal disruption, meta-fictive strategies and labyrinths of narrative structures'.[22] Traces of these assumptions can be detected in many analyses of novels about African dictatorship. For instance, a recent article on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* argues:

> the form of Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Wizard of the Crow* challenges the Ruler's hegemony. In my analysis, the novel's narrators and Ngũgĩ's inventive use of rumor, prolepsis, and metalepsis work to create pluralistic modes of community that counteract the autocratic repressive politics of the novel's dictator. This analysis adds a distinctively political dimension to the work of narrative theorists like Gérard Genette, Mark Currie, and Brian Richardson, reading

[21] John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 295.

[22] Eli Park Sorensen, *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 10. These debates are reminiscent of Richard Rorty's 1985 argument that 'The attempt of leftist intellectuals to pretend that the avant-garde is serving the wretched of the earth by fighting free of the merely beautiful is a hopeless attempt to make the special needs of the intellectual and the social needs of the community coincide'. Quoted in Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 8. It is perhaps not a coincidence that current anxieties about the possibility of reconciling the 'interests' (in both senses of the word) of postcolonial critics with those of society in general should find a strong echo in the abundant literature that was produced in the United States during the 'Culture Wars' of the 1980s and 1990s.

> the distinctive feature of multiple narrators or proleptic rumors in the novel as signs of resistance.[23]

Here, the formal devices examined by the critic are supposedly given a 'distinctively political dimension' because they are said to serve as signs of 'resistance' and opposition to the dictator. However, the dictator under discussion is a fictional one and only a character in a novel. Consequently, this 'political dimension' exists only within the fiction, and is distinct from the nonfictional world in which the novel has been written and read, and where actual dictatorships are located – often far from the places where postcolonial academic criticism is circulated and produced. Claims to a 'distinctively political' dimension may thus seem slightly disconnected from what the article actually achieves, i.e. a careful and technical analysis of Ngũgĩ's narrative structure. In this example, one may see a response to a number of pressures towards the politicization of literary criticism: a reading which simply highlighted the formal complexities of the text, and celebrated 'Ngũgĩ's inventive use of rumor, prolepsis, and metalepsis' as a set of 'literary' qualities with no specific political significance might appear irrelevant, and would lend itself to accusations of having 'depoliticized' the text.

Such attempts to draw equivalences between the textual and the political have constituted one of the most disputed but also one of the most engaging aspects of postcolonial criticism. It has been particularly crucial to that strand of the discipline sometimes referred to as 'textualist'. Central to this approach is the notion that political phenomena such as colonialism not only manifest themselves through material conditions, but also operate through 'discursive apparatuses'. For instance, in a 1994 article entitled 'The Textuality of Empire', Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson wrote:

> Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality, both institutionally as scholars like Gauri Viswanathan (1989) have shown, and informally. Colonialism (like its

[23] Robert L. Colson, 'Arresting Time, Resisting Arrest: Narrative Time and the African Dictator in Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*', *Research in African Literatures*, 42 (2011), 133-153 (p. 133).

> counterpart, racism), then, is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation.[24]

Comparably, Bill Ashcroft's *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001) defines the post-colonial as 'not a chronological period but a range of material conditions and a rhizomic pattern of discursive struggles, ways of contending with various specific forms of colonial oppression', thus placing the material and discursive aspects of the post-colonial predicament on the same level, and implicitly conflating the two levels under the phrase 'various forms of colonial oppression'.[25] A central manoeuvre of this type of criticism has been to use this textual understanding of social and political realities to revise binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized, or oppression/resistance, in order to create a new range of concepts emphasizing instead the ambiguous forms of interdependency and ambivalence that link the previously opposed terms. Homi Bhabha's work on the notions of 'mimicry', 'liminality', and 'hybridity', is perhaps the most famous example of this investment in the 'interstitial'. In Bhabha's arguments, as in much of the research in postcolonial theory it has inspired, this destabilization of boundaries is linked to a subversive agenda, as it is said to expose the 'ambivalence' of colonial authority itself, and to reveal new forms of agency for the colonized subject or objectified 'Other':

> My contention, elaborated in my writing on postcolonial discourse in terms of mimicry, hybridity, sly civility, is that this liminal moment of identification – eluding resemblance – produces a subversive strategy of subaltern agency that negotiates its own authority through a process of iterative "unpicking" and incommensurable, insurgent relinking.[26]

In recent years the viability of this ambition to combine distinctly political preoccupations with a focus on sophisticated theorization and arcane textual analysis has been increasingly contested. A growing number of critics have questioned the adequacy of textual resistance as a response to the brutal realities of colonial and neo-colonial domination. The general spirit is captured by Peter Hallward's remark in *Absolutely Postcolonial*: 'postcolonial theory emerged as the dominant paradigm for understanding collective "struggle" over the same years that witnessed the

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[24] *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, ed. by Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

[25] Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 12.

[26] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 265.

massive and sustained asset-stripping of the third world. The properly political value of this theory needs to be assessed in terms of the way it responds to *this* situation'.[27] Such debates are of course not new, and the 'textualism' I described has been opposed to another strand of criticism, usually construed as 'materialist', since the emergence of postcolonial studies. Critics such as Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, Terry Eagleton, or Benita Parry, have consistently denounced 'textualist' critics' neglect of the concrete, economic and material reality of colonial oppression, their tendency to privilege cosmopolitan figures at the expense of local populations, or the disempowering effects of the destabilization of political binaries. Over the past decade, these critiques have been advanced by a number of interventions, among them Hallward's *Absolutely Postcolonial* (2001), Robert Young's *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (2001), Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), (more ambiguously) Chris Bongie's *Friends and Enemies* (2008) and Neil Lazarus's *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011).[28] But the 'textualist' compromise has also been destabilized by a number of recent works that have called this time for greater attention to the literary and aesthetic dimensions of postcolonial criticism. My own analysis would like to situate itself in this recent movement, which includes Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Deepika Bahri's *Native Intelligence* (2003), Nicholas Harrison's *Postcolonial Criticism* (2003), Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations* (2005), and Eli Sorensen's *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary* (2010).

In the light of the conjugated assaults of materialist and literary-minded critics on the precarious balance of textuality, it seems that the field of postcolonial criticism has now reached a crossroads. This situation was sharply summarized by Chris Bongie in a recent review article. According to him, there has been a 'collapse' of the 'middle,

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[27] Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 64. This remark was also the starting point of Chris Bongie's reflexion in *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 3. In the context of Hallward's text, this assertion is more specifically inscribed within a discussion of the gap between postcolonial theory's vision of an increasingly fractured 'centre', inspired for instance by Glissant's notion of 'tout-monde', and what Hallward regards as the concrete political and economic effects of globalization.

[28] Although Bongie situates himself in the same movement as Hallward and Young, his own approach maintains a certain distance from this 'political turn', as suggested by his reluctance to turn away from literary studies, in spite of his keen awareness that 'To be situated on the side of literature when it comes to politics is not an especially heroic location'. Bongie, p. 21.

and muddled, ground' of postcolonial textualism, and this implies that postcolonial critics must now face an alternative between an 'aesthetic' and a 'political' turn:

> Ought we take an "aesthetic turn," and openly embrace literary values – of the sort that were self-consciously marginalized in *Orientalism* […]; or ought we take "the political turn," and have the nerve to acknowledge the basic irrelevance of those values to the properly political project of undoing […] the neo-colonial, neo-liberal world order that, quite probably, feeds mightily upon the sort of literary subversions on offer in Segalen's *Les Immémoriaux* no less than on those in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*?[29]

As I suggested earlier, a 'properly political' turn would probably imply abandoning the academic study of art and literature in favour of more immediately political objects and activities.[30] However, acknowledging the inevitable reliance of postcolonial criticism on the aesthetic does not necessarily entail that the only possibility left consists in making explicit what used to be implicit, and reaffirming, in Bongie's words, critics' preference for a 'particular, hegemonic and aestheticizing' definition of literature in terms of heteroglossy, linguistic complexity or textual hybridity. Such an evolution sounds highly implausible: it is hard to imagine how postcolonial critics could suddenly 'forget' the political issues that inform most work in the field, and revert to the confident assertion of their own tastes and preferences, without considering the social, cultural and racial histories with which these appear to be embroiled.[31] Besides, if an 'aesthetic turn' means that, in the present case, the examination of works about African dictatorship should leave aside the interest we may have in the extra-textual realities they apparently refer to,

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[29] Chris Bongie, 'On or About 1991', *Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, 7 (2009), 89-94 (p. 93). The book being reviewed, Jennifer Yee's *Exotic Subversions in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (Leeds: Legenda, 2008), examines work by Chateaubriand, Hugo, Flaubert and Segalen.

[30] As Jennifer Yee suggested in response to Bongie's review: 'As for Bongie's self-declared aim to undo "the neo-colonial, neo-liberal world order", it is, I agree, a "properly political" project, and it has my respect. I am left somewhat puzzled as to how he proposes to bring this revolution about, and hope that it is not through literary criticism alone'. Jennifer Yee, 'In Response to Chris Bongie's Review Article "On or About 1991": Jennifer Yee, Exotic Subversions in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction, FPS 7.2 (2009)', *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, 1 (2010), 15-17 (pp. 16-17).

[31] This is nonetheless what some proponents of a 'return to the aesthetic' in literary studies have suggested. For instance, in a recent work that argues for a reconstruction of the discipline of English around the idea of 'teaching beauty', Jennifer Green-Lewis and Margaret Soltan justify their choice to focus on an exclusively modernist and postmodernist corpus (DeLillo, Woolf, and Merrill) in these terms: 'complex works of overt and self-conscious formal ingenuity invite and indeed welcome the kind of scrutiny we hope to encourage in our students because these works offer frequent cause for aesthetic reflection without necessarily or initially distracting us with questions of content or moral import'. Jennifer Green-Lewis and Margaret Sołtan, *Teaching Beauty in Delillo, Woolf, and Merrill* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. xvii-xviii.

or the curiosity we may feel concerning the way these texts may or may not be linked to these realities, and instead focus exclusively on assessing the 'aesthetic value' of these representations in formal and broadly modernist terms, I believe that paradoxically, much of what makes these texts interesting as aesthetic objects would be lost. Therefore, the following chapters will not only re-examine the aesthetic foundations of postcolonial criticism, but also the relation between the aesthetic and those other concerns from which it is supposed to be distinct.

My discussion starts from the recognition that the aesthetic is not a transcendent, ahistorical phenomenon, but that the relation between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic constitutes what Jan Mukařovský described in *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* as a 'dialectical antinomy'.[32] In this text, Mukařovský set out to historicize the aesthetic by focusing on its changing and porous boundaries, showing how these are historically and culturally situated: 'As soon as we change our perspective in time, space, or even from one social grouping to another (e.g. from one stratum to another, one generation to another, etc.) we find a change in the distribution of the aesthetic function and of its boundaries'.[33] In his account, the very existence of a specific aesthetic function, far from being a universal function of all humankind, is historically variable: 'There are [...] environments in which there is no systematic differentiation of functions, e.g., society in the Middle Ages'.[34] These reflexions were further discussed by Raymond Williams in the chapter 'Aesthetic and Other Situations', in *Marxism and Literature*, which argues that the emergence of the modern concept of the aesthetic is directly shaped by the development of bourgeois capitalism:

> historically [...] the definition of "aesthetic" response is an affirmation, directly comparable with the definition and affirmation of "creative imagination", of certain human meanings and values which a dominant social system reduced and even tried to exclude. Its history is in

[32] Jan Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1979), p. 5.

[33] Ibid., pp. 4-5.

[34] Ibid., p. 8.

> large part a protest against the forcing of all experience into instrumentality ("utility"), and of all things into commodities.[35]

In other words, the claim of the aesthetic to be set apart from the social is itself inscribed within social circumstances, to which it responds. The value and meaning of the aesthetic depends on its relation (even if it is one of antinomy) with other dominant values and experiences. It is therefore only apparently a paradox that, as Williams adds, 'the form of this protest, within definite social and historical conditions, led almost inevitably to new kinds of privileged instrumentality and specialized commodity'.[36] Indeed, as Michael Bérubé notes in relation to these remarks, 'Williams's sense of the aesthetic as a new niche in the division of labour has been borne out spectacularly by the history of modern art, which has managed to abjure the logic of commodity so completely as to have become extremely valuable'.[37]

My adoption of this historicized, and even materialist, conception of the aesthetic is partly strategic: in emphasizing its relativity and dependency on other social meanings and contexts, I wish to make clear that a reengagement with the aesthetic does not necessarily involve endorsing an 18th- or 19th-century idealist vision. One of the objectives of this thesis is to move beyond the opposition between (more or less) Kantian notions of disinterestedness and pure attention to form[38] and the various schools of thought (materialist, sociological, postcolonial, feminist, etc.) that have exposed the hidden interests behind these notions. Instead of adopting a normative

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[35] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 151. According to Williams, 'The specializing concept of "literature", in its modern forms, is thus a central example of the controlling and categorizing specialization of "the aesthetic"' (p.150).

[36] Ibid., p. 151.

[37] Michael Bérubé, 'Introduction: Engaging the Aesthetic', in *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 1-27 (p. 11). In the same article, see also Michael Bérubé's insightful discussion of Williams's reinterpretation of Mukařovský.

[38] According to Paul Guyer the notion that aesthetic criticism is incompatible with other concerns, notably ethical ones, only emerged in later adaptations of eighteenth-century thought: 'while the idea of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment may have been an eighteenth-century innovation, it was only later adapters of the idea, in the late nineteenth century and again in the second half of the twentieth century, who thought that it makes ethical criticism of works of art problematic; neither Kant himself nor those of his predecessors who first introduced the idea of the disinterestedness of judgments of beauty, namely Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and Francis Hutcheson, thought that the disinterestedness of judgments of taste in general precluded the centrality of ethical issues to works of art in particular, and thus the appropriateness of ethical criticism of such works'. Paul Guyer, 'Is Ethical Criticism a Problem?', in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. by Garry Hagberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 1-32 (pp. 1-2).

point of view, I will examine whether an approach to the aesthetic that would privilege an empirical and experiential perspective over theoretical and polemical arguments could help us elaborate a critical approach offering a better understanding of the interaction of the aesthetic with cultural, political and social issues. Contrary to much philosophical work in aesthetics, whose ambition has been to define in the most precise and rigorous manner notions such as art or the aesthetic experience, my own use of the term 'aesthetic' will thus capitalize on the imprecision of its current use, as a means of capturing common ways of thinking about art and literature.[39] Indeed, as will become clearer in the course of the thesis, it is my contention that the imprecision and contradictions carried by the term reveal something crucial about the nature of aesthetic experiences.

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By examining literature alongside other genres and media, I will be able to emphasize how the relationship between aesthetic and ethical/political concerns is not static but operates differently in and across genres, as it intersects with other elements such as the relative popularity of the works under consideration, the way their aesthetic value has been perceived, or the different forms of referentiality they have been seen to establish. Although this generic diversity is among other things an attempt to convey something of the variety of representations of African dictatorships, my selection is not meant to offer a representative sample of the texts produced about the topic in recent decades. Rather, the variety of objects of critical attention hopes to illustrate the multi-faceted aspect of our aesthetic encounters, while showing that a reengagement with the aesthetic inscription of postcolonial criticism does not necessarily imply the defence of a specific, modernist conception of literary value.

[39] My understanding of the word will follow what has become the dominant understanding of the term, and contrary to much eighteenth-century literature on aesthetics (notably Kant's *Critique of Judgment*), it will not include experiences that are triggered by natural objects. On this point, I will follow the argument proposed by Peter de Bolla on the importance of projecting intentionality in the aesthetic experience: 'The crucial difference between the two lies in the fact that an aesthetic experience as I understand it can only be of an artwork because it leads me to intuit that something lies within the work that was placed there intentionally'. Peter de Bolla, *Art Matters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 136.

The issues I have been discussing in this introduction will be further developed in Chapter 1, which explores the contradictions that arise from postcolonial critics' simultaneous investment in aesthetics and in politics, through an interpretation of Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire*, one of the most famous Francophone novels on African dictatorship. The aesthetic inventiveness of the novel and its narrative complexity have frequently been perceived as somehow 'subversive' – an interpretation on which I offer two different perspectives. The first part of the chapter focuses on intra-textual elements to highlight how *Le Pleurer-rire* offers a paradoxical response to the difficulties of the post-independence era, where the instrumentalization of anticolonial discourse by tyrannical regimes seems to have discredited the very notion of intellectual emancipation. My reading thus shows how *Le Pleurer-rire* could be said to use irony to deconstruct the oppressive mosaic of ideologies that often characterizes post-independence dictatorships, and to invest literature as a site of playful contestation, in opposition to classic models of political commitment. The second part of the chapter then calls this reading into question as it (re-)connects the text in a different way with its political context, examining whether this appreciation of the text, as well as its apparent rejection of previous conceptions of 'engagement', should or should not be modified by extra-textual information concerning Lopes's own involvement in Congolese politics.

Chapter 2 focuses on Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. When the novel was published in 1987, only three years after Achebe's essay *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1984) and more than twenty years after Achebe's previous novel *A Man of the People* (1966), many readers expected it to offer a solution to the predicament exposed in the essay, and to provide clear insights into the role of African intellectuals in the era of post-independence dictatorships. Many of these readers were disappointed. This chapter retraces the modalities of this reception, and situates it in relation to the opposition between literary autonomy and political commitment which has often polarized critical discussions of African literature, including Achebe's own theoretical interventions.[40] My discussion focuses more precisely on

[40] The phrase 'African literature' here and elsewhere in the thesis is not meant to downplay the variety of the literary works produced in different parts of the continent, or the heterogeneity of the contexts from which these works have emerged. In fact I will often privilege the plural form 'African literatures', whenever this will seem more accurate. However, as David Murphy and Patrick Williams have argued in relation to the term 'African cinema', the use of the singular may be justified

the difficulties inherent in any reading of African texts as 'literature'. Following on from the paradoxes uncovered in Chapter 1, and interrogating the contrast between Lopes's reluctance to link his novel to real political situations and Achebe's famous stance on the didactic role of literature, this chapter shows how the apparent contradictions between the impulse towards a political reading of the text and an attention to its aesthetic and 'literary' qualities can in fact serve as a driving force for its interpretation. These aspects are brought to the fore by assessing Achebe's novel against the model of the 'roman à thèse', as analysed by Susan Suleiman in *Authoritarian Fictions*.[41]

If the first two chapters are mostly concerned with the tension between forms of criticism that focus on the aesthetics of texts and approaches that privilege political interpretations, Chapter 3 destabilizes this opposition by showing how these apparently conflicting modes of interpretation are not only theoretically dependent on each other, but also intricately entangled at the level of the reader or viewer's experiences. This chapter examines three films about Ugandan dictator Idi Amin Dada: *Général Idi Amin Dada: Autoportrait* (1974), by Franco-Swiss documentarist Barbet Schroeder, the British drama *The Last King of Scotland* (2006) by Kevin MacDonald, and the 'exploitation' film *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* by Kenyan director Sharad Patel (1981). Starting with a discussion of Amin's popularity, the chapter engages with the ethical issues raised by the potential exploitation of African dictators as a sensational topic for filmmakers. Indeed, considering the extent of Amin's crimes and the ways in which a denunciation of African dictatorships may feed racist stereotypes, it might seem legitimate to privilege an interpretative approach that would favour ethical concerns over aesthetics. In addition, whereas in the case of Achebe's and Lopes's literary representations, concerns or claims relating to their potential impact would have to be mitigated by their relatively limited circulation, a successful entertainment film such as *The Last King of Scotland* may

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strategically by the fact that in the anticolonial context, the idea of a politically committed 'African literature', was often opposed to the equally generalizing notion of 'Western literature'. Although the phrase 'African literature' does not do justice to the wealth of literary productions created in Africa, it has however constituted a key notion in the production, the theoretical discussion and the reception of African literatures. See David Murphy and Patrick Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 5-6.

[41] Susan R. Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

be said to bring a new urgency to the question of its influence on the general public. However, this chapter provides further evidence that the opposition between political or ethical judgment on the one hand, and aesthetics on the other hand needs to be reexamined, as the two are inextricably linked in the way the films under consideration are actually experienced and interpreted. Furthermore, by introducing films that belong to widely different genres, this chapter is also able to introduce new lines of analysis concerning the way perceptions of aesthetic value determine the articulation of aesthetics and politics.

Finally, Chapter 4 returns to the predicament of discursive saturation that I examine at the beginning of Chapter 1, where I suggest that Lopes's novel could be read as a response to the difficulty of negotiating a path between depictions of Africa that are mired in colonial clichés and the perverted anticolonial rhetoric that many dictatorial regimes have exploited. This chapter considers how the arguments developed throughout this thesis might provide us with a new understanding of these issues. This time, the question is examined through a reading of Achille Mbembe's landmark essay 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony' (1992). My reading takes as its starting point Mbembe's ambition to create a new form of knowledge about Africa, which would use its own aesthetic power in order to move beyond what he has termed the 'cul-de-sac' of many discourses about Africa. My analysis goes on to examine the epistemological uncertainty created by Mbembe's writing, and particularly by his abundant use of the work of Congolese novelist Sony Labou Tansi, which keeps cropping up in Mbembe's essay. I suggest that this proximity to fiction should not be understood as an invitation to forsake distinctions between literature and the social sciences, or between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, however unstable they may be. Rather, it is through the simultaneous destabilization and confirmation of these distinctions that Mbembe's essay may be said to produce a new form of knowledge, one that is not necessarily located in the text itself, but emerges from the confusing experience of reading it.

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The Emperor's Old Clothes: Two Readings of Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire*

At the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx famously wrote that 'all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice': 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.[42] This remark was directed at Napoléon III, or 'Napoléon le petit', whom Marx regarded as a 'caricature' of his uncle, Napoléon I[er]. Looking at images of Bokassa's coronation as 'Emperor of Central Africa' in December 1977, in which the famous scenography of

[42] Marx attributes this observation to Hegel. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 15.

Napoléon I[er]'s self-crowning was scrupulously reproduced and symbols of the Napoleonic Empire lavishly displayed, one cannot help but wonder: what about the third time?

As Derrida emphasized in *Spectres de Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire* represents this apparent repetition of history through the metaphor of the ghost: Marx's text is full of spirits and awakened dead.[43] Accordingly, Bokassa's crowning could be read as another return of Napoleon's ghost and, as such, a potent symbol for the ambiguous significations of the 'post-' in 'postcolonial'.[44] In reality, the example of Bokassa does not enact one but two 'returns'. Behind the return of Napoleon's ghost looms another, perhaps even more disturbing: the supposed 'return to barbarity'. Bokassa's desperate efforts to conjure up the spirit of Napoleon did not inspire the awe he was hoping for, but sarcasm in the European media and embarrassment on the African continent – even his close friends Mobutu and Bongo declined to attend.[45] In his historical study of Bokassa's reign, Brian Titley writes: 'The coronation was seen to epitomize the worst Western stereotypes of the continent, and it was said to play into the hands of the white supremacists in Rhodesia and South Africa, who insisted that blacks were childlike, irresponsible, and incapable of ruling themselves'.[46] This is indeed one of the most frequent commentaries elicited by African post-independence dictatorships: 'Has the darkness that Europeans once ascribed to Africa finally become a reality?'[47] Bokassa is a good example of this, if one remembers how his deposition by the French army in 1979 was partly justified by his alleged cannibalism, with pictures in *Paris Match* of bodies he was supposedly keeping in his giant refrigerators.[48]

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[43] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'Etat de la dette, le travail du deuil et la Nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

[44] For an interpretation of the ghost along these lines, see David Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 62.

[45] See for instance Patrick Poivre d'Arvor's comments about "ce sacre qui n'en est pas vraiment un". 'Couronnement Bokassa 1er', *Journal de 20h d'Antenne 2 (05/12/1977)* (Antenne 2) <http://www.ina.fr/video/CAB7701900801/couronnement-bokassa-1er.fr.html> [accessed 25 September 2009].

[46] Brian Titley, *Dark Age: The Political Odyssey of Emperor Bokassa* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2002), p. 97.

[47] Muhonjia Khaminwa, 'Destroy All Monsters', *Transition*, 9 (2000), 98-108 (p. 105).

[48] 'Bokassa: le tyran déboulonné', *Paris Match*, 1979, pp. 64-73 (pp. 68-69). These rumours were never confirmed.

Instead of ghosts and spirits, this return of a past that was actually never there (a childlike, anthropophagic Africa) would be better captured through another uncanny figure: the *déjà vu*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines its primary meaning as 'an illusory feeling of having previously experienced a present situation; a form of paramnesia' and dates this use of the term to 1903. This would correspond well to the perceived 'return' of Africa's fantasized past. But in the second half of the 20th century, a second meaning of *déjà vu* appeared: 'the correct impression that something has been previously experienced; tedious familiarity'. As Nicholas Royle has underlined, there is an apparent contradiction between these two definitions, since *déjà vu* can be both an 'illusory feeling' and a 'correct impression'.[49] However, this contradiction befits the complex impressions produced by postcolonial dictatorships. In the comments I quoted before, 'the return to barbarity' is not experienced as a naive *déjà vu*, but is pervaded by the awareness that the only notions available to describe African dictatorships are 'tediously familiar' clichés. See, for instance, how in a recent interview about his book on Uganda, writer Andrew Rice uncomfortably declared: 'If one historical figure could be said to embody the continent as it is stereotypically imagined — dark, dangerous, atavistic and charged with sexual magnetism — it would be Idi Amin Dada'.[50] What Rice is experiencing in front of Amin is a degraded *déjà vu*, in which both meanings are merged: the uncanny illusion of repetition and the correct impression that it is in fact a mere accumulation of clichés. In his analysis, Royle makes this passing remark: 'we are living in the epoch of the double-sense of "*déjà vu*"'.[51] This could describe the age of African dictatorships.

The ghost is not the only significant metaphor in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*. As Derrida emphasized, it is closely intertwined with another: language.[52] In the second paragraph, Marx writes:

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[49] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 172.

[50] Howard W. French, 'Lost in Uganda', *The New York Times*, 2 August 2009, section Sunday Book Review, p. 14 (p. 14).

[51] Royle, p. 172.

[52] Derrida, pp. 180-81.

> The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene in world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.[53]

In the context of this discussion, the phrase 'borrowed language' not only represents adequately the notion that Bokassa is borrowing the political language of the French Napoleonic Empire, but it also resonates with the situation of linguistic and cultural imposition that characterized colonial domination. What *The Eighteenth Brumaire* sketches out is the possibility, and indeed the necessity, for each historical epoch to attain a relation of authenticity with itself. The conjuring of spirits and the use of a borrowed language should only be temporary. This is for instance what happened with Cromwell's revolution: 'Cromwell and the English people had borrowed speech, passions, and illusions from the Old Testament for their bourgeois revolution. When the real aim had been achieved, when the bourgeois transformation of English society had been accomplished, Locke supplanted Habakkuk'.[54] Ultimately, the order of being and appearance is restored and ghosts are driven away. This reordering finds its equivalent in the language metaphor:

> In like manner, a beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new.[55]

Yet something does not quite fit anymore. In the case of ideological and political language, each historical era needs to make its language coincide with its essence, needs to renounce the language of the past to learn how to use its own. But Marx's simile with the learning of a foreign language illustrates the opposite movement: what the beginner is slowly renouncing and forgetting is precisely his own language and he is doing so in order to master the foreign, 'borrowed' language. If we

[53] Marx, p. 15.

[54] Ibid., p. 17.

[55] Ibid., p. 15.

transpose this observation into the postcolonial context, where does this leave the possibility of finding an original language to escape the African *déjà vu*?

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The quest for an authentic, African mode of representation was central to the agenda of nationalist movements in Africa, and the investment of language as a site of political accommodation or resistance is itself strongly linked to nationalist conceptions of the relation between culture and identity. Anticolonial discourse thus assigned an important role to literature, which was perceived as pivotal in the rehabilitation of African cultures and in the elaboration of an original and distinctively African voice, leading to important debates on the legitimacy of African literature in European languages.[56] For instance, the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1959 insisted simultaneously on the revolutionary role of literature and on the mission of writers to create a common language for black Africans.[57] African literature was called upon to 'go beyond fixed literary structures, such as they result from Western literary history', and it was expected that the black

[56] In the Anglophone field, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have famously embodied two opposite stances on this question. According to Ngũgĩ's nationalist argument, language arises from a people's material conditions of life and gradually becomes the depository of its memory: 'Languages in their particular forms arise historically as social needs. Over a time, a particular system of verbal signposts comes to reflect a given people's historical consciousness of their twin struggles with nature and with one another. Their language becomes the memory bank of their collective struggle. Such a language comes to embody both continuity and change in their historical consciousness'. In this view, what is produced by African writers in European languages is 'not African literature at all' but a form of 'literary enslavement'. Achebe, however, favoured a more pragmatic position: 'a language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself'. According to him, colonialism is an integral part of Africa's history, and the emergence of the nation-states cannot be abstracted from this legacy – in fact, the nation-state and the use of European languages are fundamentally by-products of the same processes. This led Achebe to suggest that the use of English could in fact constitute a powerful means of communication for the construction of African nation-state: 'There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication'. Instead of the use of African languages, Achebe thus argued for the 'africanization' of European languages: 'I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings'. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics: A Re-Engagement with Issues of Literature and Society*, revised and enlarged edition (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), pp. 58; 57 and 53; Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1975), pp. 83, 95 and 103. For a discussion of Ngũgĩ's evolution on these issues, see also Simon Gikandi, 'Travelling Theory: Ngugi's Return to English', *Research in African Literatures*, 31 (2000), 194-209.

[57] Phyllis Taoua, 'Performing Identity: Nations, Cultures and African Experimental Novels', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 14 (2001), 193-219 (p. 204).

writer 'should from a natural tendency invent new structures, corresponding to the history of his people'.[58] The political disillusion that characterized the post-independence era led to a reconsideration of the role and power of the writer, and to a questioning of previous forms of committed literature. Thus, in the field of Francophone African literature, the theme of dictatorship has sometimes been associated with the idea of a post-independence aesthetic 'renewal'. In his 1986 book *Nouvelles écritures africaines: romanciers de la seconde génération*, Séwanou Dabla described Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie* (1979) and the novel on which my discussion will now focus, Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire* (1982), as prime examples of the emergence of a new and subversive stage of African literature.[59] A similar analysis was proposed in *Création et rupture en littérature africaine* (1996) by Georges Ngal, who also insisted on the groundbreaking dimension of *La Vie et demie* and *Le Pleurer-rire*, especially in their treatment of dictatorship:

> L'apparition de Sony Labou Tansi avec *La Vie et demie* (1979) et d'autres écrivains comme H. Lopès [sic] avec *le Pleurer-rire* (1982) permet de parler de 'ruptures', dans le champ linguistique et littéraire. Le contexte historique incite à la revendication de plus de liberté face au dictateur, démystifié, rendu plus bouffon et ubuesque, dans un Etat, échec du placage de l'Etat d'origine européenne.[60]

However, the opposition between anticolonial and post-independence literatures should not be exaggerated, just as Dabla and Ngal's accounts tend to present a somewhat caricatural vision of the previous generation of writers as narrowly realist and hostile to formal concerns, the fact that the use of anti-realist modes of representation in the post-independence era coincided with the emergence of African dictatorships as a central theme of African literature shows the persistent engagement of many African writers with political realities.

Le Pleurer-rire offers a privileged site of inquiry to understand the particular difficulty of rearticulating politics, aesthetics and literature in the 1980s. The novel indeed combines the exploration of a political theme with a complex, multi-layered narrative and a constant use of metafiction. *Le Pleurer-rire* is set in a fictional

[58] Quoted in Taoua, 193-219 (p. 205).

[59] Séwanou Dabla, *Nouvelles écritures africaines: romanciers de la seconde génération* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986).

[60] Georges Ngal, *Création et rupture en littérature africaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994), p. 27.

country called 'Le Pays', which is situated 'quelque part sur ce continent' (60) (Africa, presumably) and is ruled by a dictator, Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé. Bwakamabé is a brutal tyrant, who has been compared to a number of real African heads of states, notably Bokassa (who shared his nostalgic passion for the French army), Mobutu (who made similar arguments about democracy being a Western invention), Sékou Touré (who had comparable literary ambitions) or Idi Amin (whose expulsion of Uganda's Indian community resembles Bwakamabé's eviction of Lusitanian traders).[61] The composite character of 'Le Pays' is reinforced by the mosaic of languages that have been included in the novel, especially in the characters' names, which are derived from Lingala, French, Kikongo, Latin and Arabic.[62] The main narrative strand of the novel consists of a retrospective first-person account by a character named 'Maître', who used to be Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé's *maître d'hôtel* and is now writing a memoir about this experience while living in exile. This main narrative is constantly interrupted by sub-plots and digressions resulting from Maître's apparent lack of focus, as well as by the critical comments of some of the other characters on the truthfulness and political value of Maître's manuscript.[63]

Maître corresponds to one of the familiar devices of satire, that of the naive narrator. He describes himself as 'un nègre modeste qui fait son éducation' by listening to other people's opinions (36). Thus Maître is usually keen to let others intervene in his narrative, and his own voice feeds on all the worn-out discourses that surround him: dictatorial propaganda, colonial clichés, anticolonial platitudes, patriarchal prejudices, rumours ('radio-trottoir'), quotations from canonical writers, and so on. But in reality, Maître's account constantly undermines these opinions: not only are they frequently made to contradict each other, but his own narrative actually

[61] On these echoes, see Boniface Mongo Mboussa, 'Ecriture politique et politique de l'écriture au Congo', in *Enjeux littéraires et construction d'espaces démocratiques en Afrique subsaharienne*, ed. by Maria-Benedita Basto (Paris: Centre d'études africaines, EHESS, 2007), pp. 121-130.

[62] This aspect of the text has been the object of a detailed study by T. Zezeze Kalonji, 'Pour une analyse plurielle du "pleurer-rire" (de Henri Lopes)', *Peuples Noirs Peuples Africains*, 37 (1984), 30-54.

[63] Relying on Lopes's shifts in typography, Patrick Corcoran identifies three main sequences: Maître's account of his interactions with Bwakamabé and of his private life (standard typeface), Maître's day-dreaming about his schoolteacher Mme Berger (italics), and the commentaries offered by other characters (smaller typeface). *Henri Lopes, Le Pleurer-rire*, Glasgow Introductory Guides to French Literature, 47 (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 2002), pp. 53-56.

reproduces them in a slightly altered form.[64] For instance, Maître borrows his depiction of Bwakamabé from the official press:

> A l'école primaire, il aurait appris plus vite que les autres et se serait distingué à l'attention de ses moniteurs par des qualités exceptionnelles. […] Il n'aurait jamais fait une faute d'orthographe à ses dictées. Il aurait toujours été le plus rapide en calcul mental et le meilleur en problèmes. Car sinon, il n'aurait jamais été admis à l'Ecole des enfants de troupe du Général Mangin et ne serait pas aujourd'hui président de la République.
>
> Tel est ce que nous apprenait, ou à peu près, ce jour-là, l'éditorialiste de *La Croix du Sud*, Aziz Sonika, celui-là même qui nourrit le culte de Polépolé et pourfendit, la plume trempée dans la bile d'hyène, l'injure plein la salive, les opposants de l'ancien président. (29-30)

Although the text does not offer any alternative to the official version, 'ou à peu près' is precisely where irony creeps in. The use of conditionals and of free indirect speech, the reminder of Aziz Sonika's opportunism (Polépolé was deposed by Bwakamabé), and the exaggerated nature of the praise leave little doubt as to the falsity of what has just been said (Bwakamabé's linguistic incompetence throughout the novel makes it hard to believe that he never made spelling mistakes, supposing he even went to school).

Comparably, Maître often reproduces colonial clichés about Africans. For instance, in a digression in which he reminisces over his attraction to his French school teacher, he comments on his own excitation by saying: 'Les Oncles semblent penser rarement à ces choses-là, eux. Mais moi j'avais, malgré le catéchisme et l'éducation des bons pères, les idées déjà mal orientées. Les nègres-là…' (50). The disputable notion that white people do not often think about sex, the quaint euphemism 'idées mal orientées' and the comic effect of the phrase 'les nègres-là...', which reproduces colonial prejudices about black people while making a typically West African use of '-là' for emphasis, all convey the passage's irony.[65]

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[64] Justin Bisanswa has thus described Maître's narration as a 'pillage interdiscursif': 'La singularité de sa parole procède d'un véritable pillage interdiscursif (Aragon, Montaigne, Cocteau, Salluste, Du Bellay, Cicéron, Césaire, Senghor, Laye, etc.), en ce sens qu'avec une désinvolture résolument anti-positiviste, il détourne et subvertit à travers leurs langages la prétendue certitude des savoirs qu'ils convoquent et révoquent du même geste'. 'Le Tapis dans l'image. Je est un autre.', in *Henri Lopes: Une Lecture d'enracinement et d'universalité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), pp. 171-187 (p. 173).

[65] I am only examining a few examples of *Le Pleurer-rire*'s pervasive irony. For a technical analysis of the rhetorical devices through which irony is conveyed in the novel, see Cyriaque L. Lawson-

This extensive copying and intermixing of other discourse is dramatized within the novel when Maître is accused of plagiarism. The accusation has been brought by another writer, referred to as 'un certain Benoist-Meschin', whose text Maître claims he has never read (183). Maître once again toys with the fact that he is partly reproducing the discourse of the French about Africa: 'Benoist-Meschin' is a quintessential French name, and its sonority is strongly reminiscent of the French word 'Machin', which is used to designate something or somebody whose name one cannot be bothered to learn or remember. In addition, some readers may recognize this passage as a possible reference to the minor collaborationist writer Jacques Benoist-Méchin, a self-declared admirer of Hitler who published a series of biographies celebrating, among others, Bonaparte and his campaign in Egypt, Hubert Lyautey and T.E. Lawrence.[66] In signalling the proximity between his critical account of dictatorship and Benoist-Meschin's, Maître emphasizes once more his apparent lack of a consistent political viewpoint, while questioning his own credentials as a progressive writer. Maître's defence against Benoist-Meschin's accusation consists in saying: 'Monsieur Benoist-Meschin a fait le même rêve que nous, par un après-midi d'intense réalité, et […] c'est bien à cela que se reconnaissent les hommes d'une même époque' (183). In this passage, both meanings of *déjà vu* merge again: the uncanny feeling, with its peculiar 'intensity' of reality, and the pervasive stereotypes of a given epoch. Maître then goes on to dismiss Benoist-Meschin's claims by saying:

> Qu'il sorte un instant d'une conception par trop étriquée et surannée de l'univers, pour tenter de comprendre celui du Monde Noir, l'univers des nouveaux horizons, mais aussi des mystères. Qu'il interroge donc mille Africains choisis indifféremment dans la cinquantaine d'Etats qui forment la mosaïque du continent et il découvrira alors qu'il en existe au moins un nombre égal, pour lui affirmer qu'en fait, non, vraiment non, c'est un épisode de leur vie que je viens de relater là. (182)

Hellu's article, which notably considers Lopes's use of antiphrasis, euphemism, hyperbole, distancing effects and onomastics, 'L'Ironie du "Pleurer-Rire" chez Henri Lopes', *Etudes Littéraires*, 30 (1998), 123-140.

[66] Jacques Benoist-Méchin, *Bonaparte en Egypte, ou le Rêve inassouvi* (Lausanne: Guilde du livre, 1966); *Lyautey l'Africain, ou Le Rêve immolé* (Lausanne: Guilde du livre, 1966); *Lawrence d'Arabie ou le Rêve fracassé* (Lausanne: Éditions Clairefontaine, 1961).

Maître's invitation to understand the mysteries of the 'black world' may sound like a bad faith attempt to justify his plagiarism of a French author in the name of African authenticity. It could also be read as a parody of Jacques Benoist-Méchin's own exoticizing vision, notably through the references to 'le Monde Noir' (with the use of capital letters reinforcing the essentializing dimension of the phrase), its 'mysteries' and the 'new horizons' these constituted for European explorers. However, the notion that a thousand Africans from all over the continent might recognize the incriminated episode as one moment of their own life can also be taken more seriously, as a reflexion on the influence of colonial ideas on the way Africa's realities are experienced and on the complex forms of subjectivities that are created by the postcolonial context. In this collective *déjà vu*, it is as if the pervasiveness of stereotypes had made it impossible to experience the 'here and now' in its singularity, and the African continent in its variety.

Thus, clichés play an important role in the construction of a referent for the fictional 'Pays', and allow the reader to conjure up a mental image of it as a generic African country. For instance, at the beginning of a description of 'le Pays', Maître writes:

> Je ne dirai pas ses couleurs que le soleil met en valeur comme sur une diapositive. Je ne dirai rien de ses sons, de ses odeurs, du rythme des hanches des femmes qui s'en vont, des charges en équilibre sur la tête. Les écrivains de l'exotisme, ceux de la négritude, les rédactions des écoliers, ont déjà suffisamment décrit nos villages et les marchés de nos villes. Il n'y a plus rien à ajouter. A moins d'être ce génie que le siècle attend et qui n'a plus que quelques années pour se présenter (64).

In this passage, organized around the use of paralipsis, Maître dismisses the usual exotic clichés about Africa at the same time that he reproduces them. Indeed, if 'le pays' is to be located somewhere, it is precisely in the play between the particular and the general, facts and clichés, fiction and reality that Maître's paralipsis triggers in the mind of the reader. In other words, the referentiality of Maître's narrative depends on the very clichés that it simultaneously exposes.

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Critics have been prompt to resituate the irony and collages of *Le Pleurer-rire* within a project of political resistance. Yet, as I have already implied, the constant incorporation of other voices, notably through the use of irony, is also a sign of the novel's inability to adopt a position of clear-cut opposition to the discourses it mocks. For instance, the review of the novel in the journal *Ethiopiques* insists: 'Qu'on ne s'y trompe pas : le ton enjoué qui baigne le roman n'empêche pas qu'il s'agisse de littérature engagée, dénonciatrice'.[67] Some critics have also argued that the novel offers a structural alternative to dictatorship. One of the most recurrent ideas in those interpretations concerns the supposedly 'democratic' nature of fragmentation and polyphony, as opposed to the monopoly of discourse sought by the dictator. For instance, for Koffi Anyinefa, 'by multiplying the narrative voices, Lopes forces different points of view to enter the novel: one can read a democratic principle of polyphony'.[68] However, the opposition between Maître's polyphonic narrative and the dictator's discourse should not be exaggerated. In its opportunism, Bwakamabé's speech too displays a high degree of ideological and cultural diversity. It mixes French army talk ('Bande d'indigènes, bande d'enfoirés' (93), African phrases (notably the recurring salute 'Wollé, wollé? Woï Woï !', or the frequent insult 'con de leur maman !'), French slang ('la caillasse' (81), 'sensas' (145)), a lot of misguided attempts at formal French ('*Or que*' (230), '*tout est il que*' (236)), and even a few perilous ventures into English ('Un géant (il prononçait *giant*)' (337))'. Besides, Bwakamabé's political inspirations, although they are united by a certain cult of absolute power, are strikingly eclectic, and he gives equal praise to 'Papa De Gaulle' (318), Hitler ('Hitler, c'était la grande Allemagne' (337); Stalin ('Lui aussi c'était un as. Chapeau !' (337)), and Napoléon ('Ah ! L'homme-là !' (336)). This cultural and political slipperiness, far from being necessarily 'democratic' is in fact at the heart of the regime's artificial and corrupt nature.

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[67] Dono Ly Sangaré, '*Le Pleurer-rire* par Henri Lopez', *Ethiopiques*, 1983 <http://ethiopiques.refer.sn/spip.php?article916> [accessed 31 August 2009].

[68] Koffi Anyinefa, 'Postcolonial Postmodernity in Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire*', in *The Post-Colonial Condition of African Literature*, ed. by Daniel Gover, John Conteh-Morgan and Jane Bryce (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000), pp. 5-22 (p. 13).

Another reason to remain cautious in attributing to the text an 'oppositional' value has to do with its own treatment of the relation between literature and politics. This theme appears already in the few pages entitled 'sérieux avertissement' that open the novel – the first in a long series of ironic, self-reflexive comments on the text and its interpretation. This *avertissement* is a fake document, signed by the fictitious 'Associations des censeurs francophones', which parodies the way some African postcolonial states have used censorship. It presents itself as an emphatic condemnation of *Le Pleurer-rire*, whose author is described as 'une canaille qui mérite le cachot, quelques bons coups de chicotte et l'oubli' (9). However, a very important point in the censors' 'avertissement' is that they actually refuse to ban the text, for fear that this gesture should increase readers' interest, and make the book seem more significant or dangerous than it really is:

> Les livres proscrits se vendent sous le manteau mieux que les bons. Et nous détenons des dossiers de méchants auteurs qui, pour se faire une réputation acquise à peu de frais et mieux liquider leur marchandise, recherchent cyniquement la publicité que confèrent les décrets de la censure. (9)

By representing itself as a novel that censors resent but do not find worthy of being either forbidden or destroyed, and by highlighting, even in this ironic form, the potential opportunism behind this representation of itself as a censorable text, the novel invites us to question its own position as an act of political opposition. This 'avertissement' may not only be read as a parody of censorship, but also as a mockery of the very expectations it creates, namely that the text is necessarily going to be subversive because it is an African novel dealing with dictatorship.

A similar play with the potentiality of censorship can be found when Maître concludes his depiction of the fictional 'Pays' with this disclaimer:

> Mais j'en ai trop dit et me suis permis trop d'imprudences dans ma description. Certains risqueraient de croire que c'est dans la capitale de leur pays que vit Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé, ce qui est, bien sûr, totalement faux et absurde. (67-68)

According to Ange-Séverin Malanda, 'L'indétermination des lieux (et l'indétermination du référent) évoqués dans *Le Pleurer-rire* permet de surmonter et

d'annihiler l'illusion (la superstition, la chimère) référentielle'.[69] But one could as easily argue the opposite: this indeterminacy is made to foster the very referential impulse it appears to discourage. As usual, there are several levels of irony here: the narrator's insistent denial ('bien sûr, totalement faux et absurde') is an oblique encouragement to 'read between the lines' and to link the fiction with a real African place. The necessity of evading censorship is implied by Maître's allusions to 'saying too much' and 'imprudence'. But at another level, it is indeed possible that the narrator is simply poking fun at those readers who are always trying to link fiction with a familiar reality, and Maître's coyness may simply be a trick to make his story more intriguing.

However, several clues suggest that there may be a more serious point to this systematic destabilization of the impulses towards political realities. The theme of the relationship between censorship, literature and political commitment reappears in the evocation of Matapalé, a famous writer who has been jailed for opposing Bwakamabé's regime (73-4). This elicits not only the indignation of the Western media, but also the international consecration of Matapélé as a literary genius. Maître regards these reactions as a great exaggeration and, in spite of his sympathy for the writer's activism, dismisses Matapalé as a mediocre author: 'Le grand prix de l'Union française qu'il a obtenu ne prouve rien, sinon qu'à cette époque les autres nègres n'écrivaient pas mieux et que les Oncles s'émerveillaient, comme d'un exploit, devant vingt pages écrites par un nègre' (73). In these disdainful and provocative comments, Maître exposes the potential condescension behind appraisals of African literature that tend to privilege the political commitment or the national origin of authors instead of the properly literary and aesthetic value of their works.

Maître's argument for the separation of political and aesthetic evaluations is significant if we remember that an important aspect of the censors' 'sérieux avertissement' is that their criticisms are not only aimed at the text's disrespect for power but also at its failure to comply with a certain conception of committed literature. For instance, the author of *Le Pleurer-rire* and his fellow writers are blamed for using 'un ton qui n'a rien à voir avec la négritude' (10). What emerges

[69] Ange-Séverin Malanda, *Henri Lopes et l'impératif romanesque* (Paris: Silex, 1987), p. 93.

from the novel is actually a form of collusion between the aesthetics of anticolonial, politically committed literature (which the censors equate with *négritude*) and dictatorship. This is confirmed later when Bwakamabé himself writes a ballet, which is not only a monument of kitsch but also appropriates most of the topoi of anticolonial didacticism for the self-promotion of the regime. It represents the brutal conquest of Angola by the Portuguese and the heroic liberation of the country by Bwakamabé's own troops. This is hailed by the other heads of state as 'l'art réaliste éducatif et militant dont l'Afrique avait besoin' and is explicitly contrasted with 'les écrivains africains dont les poèmes étaient désespérément rédigés en charabia et dont les pièces de théâtre et les romans se complaisaient dans un ton pleurnichard et subversif' (109). In this situation where the very language and ideas that carried the hopes of independence have been reinvested by a new form of oppression, the idea of a literary and aesthetic autonomy seems to take on a renewed relevance and may even represent a potential means of emancipation.

Therefore, in spite of its unmistakably political topic, a key element of *Le Pleurer-rire* seems to consist in simultaneously suggesting and destabilizing political interpretations. To underline this, I would like to focus on a theme which, at first sight, is not directly political: Maître's busy sex-life, which echoes Bwakamabé's own sexual hyperactivity. There are indeed a large number of erotic digressions throughout the novel but, as Patrick Corcoran has observed, they have received little critical attention.[70] Yet many elements of these adventures point to a link between sex and politics. This is notably the case of Maître's affair with Bwakamabé's wife, which, as Corcoran argues, subverts not only the master/servant relation, but also traditional gender roles, since the dictator's wife practically orders Maître into bed.[71] It is also around these erotic passages that some of the most important turning points of the narrative are articulated. For instance, it is because his conversations with his mistress have been wiretapped that Maître falls into disgrace and has to go into exile. Finally, these erotic passages are the object of a particularly intense interpretive activity within the novel itself. The following paragraphs will focus on two particularly significant examples.

[70] Corcoran, p. 50.

[71] Ibid., p. 51.

The first to discuss Maître's philandering is a character named 'le jeune compatriote directeur de cabinet', one of Bwakamabé's former advisers. 'Le jeune compatriote' is a serious and somewhat naive young man, who in principle opposed Bwakamabé but thought he might curb Bwakamabé's most destructive policies by collaborating with his regime. As he writes, Maître regularly sends him his manuscript in order to get his opinion. The comments are then inserted directly into the text of the novel, in a smaller typeface. 'Le jeune compatriote' condemns Maître's erotic digressions for being inappropriate and for creating a distraction from the political project of the novel:

> Vous me faites peur avec toutes ces scènes d'amour trop osées. […] Sans être, dans ma vie privée, un ascète, je me demande si l'on a le droit de mêler ainsi politique et porno, sans que celui-ci ne gâche celle-là ? [...] Il s'agissait, je le répète, à mon sens, de contribuer à la lutte contre le tyran Bwakamabé. Or, voici qu'aujourd'hui, la tournure que prend votre manuscrit me fait craindre que, cédant à des souvenirs intimes, vous mêliez les genres et perdiez de vue l'objectif fondamental de tout écrit engagé. Et un livre d'africain, vivant dans ces temps et qui se respecte, ne peut être qu'engagé… (143-144)

'Le jeune compatriote' has a very clear idea of what the aim of the book should be: contribute to the struggle against Bwakamabé. For him, this can only be achieved through a certain 'genre', namely 'committed literature', with which 'pornographic' elements are incompatible. 'Le jeune compatriote' is the proponent of a traditional kind of didactic literature and he is disappointed by Maître's unwillingness to produce a clear ideological message. He notably resents Maître's ironic treatment of the young intellectuals who oppose the regime, urging him to introduce a positive character who might embody the values of resistance: 'Si vous voulez rendre service au Pays, introduisez donc vite dans cette histoire un héros positif' (59-60). Through this comment, the proximity between 'le jeune compatriote' and the fictional censors of the 'sérieux avertissement' is made clear: they too condemned African writers for not creating any 'héros exaltant les valeurs morales et positives' of Africa and its traditions (10). The narrator predictably disavows this interpretation. This appears first through the irony to which 'le jeune compatriote' is constantly subjected, but also explicitly when Maître finally refuses to reproduce his complaints: 'Je fais grâce au lecteur des longues pages de rhétorique où mon jeune compatriote ancien directeur de cabinet, au nom de la pudeur révolutionnaire, s'en prend à la littérature

érotico-pornographique' (302). This is followed by the insertion of a two-page excerpt from Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, in which the author claims his right to describe sex as crudely as he wishes, and exposes the hypocrisy of those who accuse him (302-304). But it should be noted that the passage quoted does not really address the concerns expressed by 'le jeune compatriote' and that the issue of the relations between 'porn' and politics is left unaddressed.

Maître's sexual activities are also the object of another interpretation, this time by Monsieur Gourdain, the head of the secret services, who intercepts some of his conversations with his married mistress, Soukali. Soukali, the wife of a high civil servant, has decided that the life of a housewife is not enough for her and has found a job as a switchboard operator at the Bulgarian embassy. From there, she constantly calls Maître and demands that he declare his passion for her: 'Elle voulait entendre ma voix lui répéter que j'avais pensé à elle, que j'avais rêvé d'elle, que je l'aimais' (191). But while Maître is doing his best to obey the rules of romance talk, Monsieur Gourdain's secret services are tapping the conversations, looking for a different kind of message: those frequent phone calls from a communist embassy are immediately interpreted as coded political discussions and Maître is accused of spying in preparation for a coup. For Monsieur Gourdain, the conversations are part of a conspiracy and are all the more dangerous as his services have not been able to break the code yet: 'Le danger, de surcroît résidait, avec ces conversations codées, dans le fait que nul n'était en mesure de déterminer à quel moment serait donné l'ordre fatal' (286-287). This may be regarded as the second possible way to interpret those love scenes: finding in them an oblique political meaning. But the counter-example of M. Gourdain's paranoia apparently invalidates this type of interpretation as well.

As Patrick Corcoran argues, the constant interruptions of the political narrative by Maître's sexual activities 'authorize a complex web of ironic interpretations and ensure that the political and sexual *topoi*, which provide the substance of the novel, are inextricably linked'.[72] But, as the readings of 'le jeune compatriote' and Monsieur Gourdain exemplify, they also foreclose such interpretations. The reader is placed vis-à-vis the novel in a position similar to that of the narrator vis-à-vis the realities he

[72] Corcoran, p. 52.

tries to write about: just as the narrator of *Le Pleurer-rire* is faced with a reality where potential descriptions have been pre-empted, the reader's interpretations have also been anticipated and ridiculed. Whether we consider those sexual scenes as an apolitical entertainment or whether we attribute to them a political meaning, we find ourselves somehow aligned with those caricatural misreaders. In this sense, *Le Pleurer-rire* insists on telling us not how it wants to be read but how it should not be read. Perhaps this is precisely how Maître's erotic musings should be understood: besides their comic effect, they are not meant to be interpreted so much as misinterpreted. The ideal reading of *Le Pleurer-rire* reproduces its many ironies and exists only in the impossibility of the ridiculous misreading represented in the novel. Ultimately, the question of the novel's relation to politics is deliberately left wide open.

As announced by its title, the literary project of *Le Pleurer-rire* is marked by ambivalence. It bears testimony to both the unavoidability of the postcolonial *déjà vu* and the impulse to go beyond it. Perhaps, in the end, a similar openness to irony and interpretation could be found in Bokassa's coronation, with which I started this discussion. At first sight, Bokassa's imitation of Napoleon may seem to epitomize the entrapment of many post-colonial states in what could be called, following Marx's phrase, the 'borrowed language' of the ex-colonizer's political rhetoric. But all things considered, there may be another way to look at it: in using this 'borrowed language', Bokassa also created an unwillingly ironic effect. Irony arises from an apparent contradiction between the explicit meaning of an utterance and its context. For Napoleon I, the gesture of crowning himself instead of letting the Pope do it signified his independence vis-à-vis Rome's religious authority and a break from the traditions of the French monarchy. By importing this gesture into the postcolonial context, Bokassa destabilized its meaning and in fact suggested the opposite of its explicit content: his imitation of Napoleon's self-crowning did not signify independence but, on the contrary, his enduring political and cultural subjection to the ex-colonizer. Yet in doing so, didn't Bokassa unwittingly expose the inauthenticity and pompousness of Napoleon's own coronation, in which the French emperor presented himself as a new Caesar? In any case, all of this suggests a

provisional answer to my initial question: perhaps, when great world-historical characters appear three times, to tragedy and farce one can add irony.

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Having reached this first conclusion, I would now like to reintroduce some para- and extra-textual information that I have withheld until this point. On the back cover of the second edition of *Le Pleurer-rire,* one reads: 'Henri Lopes est congolais. Né en 1937 à Kinshasa, il a d'abord enseigné, puis occupé de hautes fonctions politiques dans son pays et en France'. In fact, Henri Lopes played a central role in the establishment of the Marxist-Leninist regime of Marien Ngouabi, who came to power in 1968 and turned Congo-Brazzaville into the first African 'Popular Republic'.[73] Lopes was among the founding members of the single party (Parti Congolais du Travail, P.C.T.), wrote the new national anthem 'Les Trois Glorieuses', and held major political offices, including Minister of Education and Minister of Foreign Affairs, before becoming Prime Minister in 1973. He resigned from this role in 1975, presumably because of political dissensions among members of the government, and became chief editor of the official P.C.T. newspaper, *Etumba*, in 1976. When Ngouabi was murdered in suspicious circumstances and supplanted by Colonel Yhomby-Opango in 1977, Lopes again entered the government as Minister of Finance. Similarly, when Denis Sassou-Nguesso toppled Yhomby-Opango in 1979, Lopes remained in charge of the same Ministry. He resigned and left for Paris in the following year, where he started a diplomatic career at UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and at the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. *Le Pleurer-rire* was published soon after, in 1982. After that, his participation in Congolese politics continued, although less directly: he took part in the National Sovereign Conference of 1991, served as a mediator

[73] Although Lopes was born in Kinshasa, i.e. in the Democratic Republic of Congo, he has spent most of his life in the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville).

between Sassou-Nguesso's government and the opposition in 1999, and has been the ambassador of the Republic of Congo in France since 1998.[74]

Should these elements have an impact on our interpretation of the text, and should they transform the reading I developed in the first part of this chapter? Although I have tried to resist attributing to irony the type of subversive political value that is often conferred on cognate notions such as mimicry and parody, it could be argued that my insistence on the political elusiveness of the novel, and on the notion that this elusiveness may be an appropriate response to dictatorship, has unduly preserved it from a number of difficult questions concerning its conditions of production. If we re-read the novel with this biographical context in mind, its play with referentiality, its often sarcastic treatment of political commitment and its defence of aesthetic autonomy may appear in a new light. It is noteworthy that Lopes, who describes his fictions as 'un jeu gratuit', has consistently refused to establish any direct link between his literary and political careers or between his novels and reality.[75] This refusal to be judged in ideological or political terms (which echoes Maître's reluctance to excuse the lack of aesthetic value of Matapalé's work in the name of his activism) was expressed unambiguously in a collection of essays published in 2003:

> Plutôt que de recenser, soupeser et classifier mes idées, mon inconscient et mon subconscient, dites-moi, s'il vous plaît, si j'ai bien campé mes personnages; dites-moi si vous apercevez leurs sourires et leurs tics, si vous sentez battre leur pouls; dites-moi si j'ai su vous dépayser, si j'ai trouvé les mots justes pour faire s'évanouir le monde environnant et pour vous tenir éveillé; dites-moi si vous vous êtes laissé prendre à mon affabulation, si, vous plaçant sous un angle d'attaque inattendu, j'ai su vous faire redécouvrir ce qui vous était pourtant familier.[76]

But this denial may actually be more complex than it appears. Just as Maître is making ironic claims to fictionality in order to encourage the very referential

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[74] Sources used in this paragraph: 'Qui est le nouveau Premier Ministre?', *Etumba* (Brazzaville, 28 May 1973), p. 12; Appolinaire Singou-Basseha, 'Chronologie de la vie et de l'œuvre de Henri Lopes', in *Henri Lopes: une lecture d'enracinement et d'universalité*, ed. by André-Patient Bokiba and Antoine Yila (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), pp. 257-261; Dominic Thomas, *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 90-92.

[75] Denyse de Salvaire, 'Entretien avec Henri Lopes', *Recherche, Pédagogie et Culture*, 1982, 120-122 (p. 121).

[76] Henri Lopes, *Ma grand-mère bantoue et mes ancêtres les Gaulois: simples discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 94.

movement that his declarations openly disavow, Lopes could be said to exploit the gap between the (theoretical) interdiction of equating the author of a fiction with its narrator and character, and the irreducible openness of literature to such a conflation in the reader's experience. Lopes could thus be suspected of producing a fiction that will invite precisely the kind of biographical interpretation that it is apparently meant to prevent, in order to offer an altered representation of his own role.

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The impulse towards such a conflation of fiction and autobiography can be illustrated by the way a number of critics have interpreted the censors' 'Sérieux avertissement' I discussed earlier. In spite of its obvious fictionality, this passage has often led to comments on the impact or meaning of the novel itself, in its own historical and political context. For instance, although Patrick Corcoran rightly underlines that 'Lopes's preoccupation with censors and censorship is [...] not necessarily a matter of personal concern',[77] he nonetheless argues:

> the real irony of the 'SERIEUX AVERTISSEMENT' is that while it offers itself to be read as a parody of the blue-pencil regime of censors, it is at least partially intended to ward off any such intervention and render the censors impotent, not in the fictional world of Maître and Bwakamabé, but in the real world where the novel by Henri Lopes will be seeking a readership.[78]

Comparably, Koffi Anyinefa contends that 'Dans ce texte à caractère officiel, Lopes soulève, d'une part les problèmes de la censure en Afrique et de l'autre, déroute les censeurs éventuels de son livre'.[79] Although these arguments about the effects of the 'avertissement' are not implausible, so far, I have found no evidence that the novel was actually censored or threatened by censorship in Congo-Brazzaville.[80]

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[77] Corcoran, p. 71.

[78] Corcoran, p. 64.

[79] Anyinefa, p. 182.

[80] Anyinefa adds in a note: 'Lopes semble avoir parfaitement prévu la réaction de certains pouvoirs africains. La fiction a ici un rapport direct avec la réalité. *Le Pleurer-rire*, selon David N'Zitoukoulou, aurait été censuré quelque temps en République Populaire du Congo' (p. 221n6). Indeed, in his critique of *Le Pleurer-rire* in *Peuples Noirs Peuples Africains* David N'Zitoukoulou contends: 'il n'est pas interdit de penser que l'écrivain congolais a voulu régler ses comptes avec ceux qu'il a servis

Considering the absence of a review of the novel in the P.C.T.'s official newspaper *Etumba* in 1982 or 1983 (whereas the newspaper often celebrated Lopes's previous texts), we may speculate that the novel was probably not greatly appreciated by the regime; and it is very possible that it was not widely distributed in Congo-Brazzaville. Another clue can be found in a 1988 issue of *Notre Librairie*, dedicated to Congolese literature. The introduction by the writer Jean-Baptiste Tati-Loutard, who was then in charge of the ministry of Culture, offers an ideologically charged presentation of Congo's literary history, tracing back the development of the country's literature to the 'Trois Glorieuses' that founded the Marxist-Leninist regime:

> Nous pouvons situer le début de l'accélération de notre histoire littéraire à partir de 1963. C'est l'année de ce que nous appelons les Trois glorieuses journées des 13, 14 et 15 août, qui ouvrent une période de remise en question de notre passé colonial, du régime néo-colonial, de nos coutumes rétrogrades. Les langues se sont alors déliées. Il en est résulté un climat d'enthousiasme révolutionnaire, d'exaltation des idéaux de liberté, de justice et de progrès.[81]

In Tati-Loutard's summary of the evolutions of Congolese literature, Henri Lopes appears twice and his collection of short stories *Tribaliques* (1971) is credited as a landmark in the emergence of 'critical realism' in Congo, whereas *Le Pleurer-rire* is never mentioned.

However, there are no traces of an explicit condemnation of the novel either.[82] In 1987, the counter-censorship organization Article 19 published a study on freedom

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pendant plus d'une décennie. Sinon pourquoi "le Pleurer-Rire" a-t-il été mis à l'index par les autorités congolaises ?' I have not found any information to corroborate this statement, and I suspect that N'Zitoukoulou may have simply ignored the fictional character of the 'avertissement' (although, as I mentioned before, the fictional censors of the 'avertissement' actually refrain from censoring the novel). David N'Zitoukoulou, '"Le Pleurer-rire" de Henri Lopes', *Peuples Noirs Peuples Africains*, 1983, 113-116 (p. 116).

[81] Jean-Baptiste Tati-Loutard, 'Itinéraire', *Notre Librairie*, 1988, 4-7 (p. 4).

[82] In Congo, censorship seems to have worked in a very complex and ambiguous manner, allowing for some criticism to be voiced as long as it was not too direct. This may be explained in part by the fact that many writers, including Jean-Baptiste Tati-Loutard, Sylvain Bemba and Tchitchelle Tchivella, as well as Henri Lopes, have held government positions. Thus, in the same issue of *Notre Librairie*, Tchichelle Tchivela declared that censorship authorities in Congo did respect the separation between the work of art and the author:

> Il faut souligner qu'au Congo la censure s'abat sur l'œuvre et non pas sur l'homme. Un cas notoire est celui de mon ami Dongala dont le recueil de nouvelles "Jazz et vin de palme" a été censuré alors que lui-même était nommé quelques mois après Secrétaire Académique à la Faculté des Sciences. "L'Etat honteux" a été interdit, mais lorsque Sony a obtenu le Grand

of speech in the country, with a list of the books known to be banned, but *Le Pleurer-rire* does not appear among the 94 references (these include for instance Sony Labou Tansi's novel on dictatorship, *L'Etat honteux*).[83] The conflation of Lopes's 'avertissement' with the actual context of *Le Pleurer-rire*'s reception is therefore illustrative of a certain eagerness to read the novel as an act of political resistance, even though there is no clear evidence that Lopes was in danger of being censored or that the 'avertissement' did enable his novel to evade censorship.

Another significant instance of the tension between literary interpretations and political realities can be found in Dominic Thomas's reading of *Le Pleurer-rire* in *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*. Thomas, contrary to the other critics I have just discussed, puts the relation between the text and Lopes's biography at the centre of his analysis, which offers an in-depth examination of literary life in Congo, while resituating the text in its institutional and political contexts. Thomas divides Congolese authors between 'official' and 'non-official' writers, according to their positions vis-à-vis the nationalist agenda of the state. Official writers are those who produce the type of literature sponsored by power (notably through the Union Nationale des Ecrivains, Artistes, et Artisans Congolais (UNEAC)) and obey a strict aesthetic code: 'Socialist Realism, accessibility, communicability, simplicity, glorification of heroes'.[84] 'Non-official' authors, on the other hand, 'subscribe to an aesthetics of *avant-gardism*' and are described as 'producing texts independently of the hegemonic power of party control, denouncing the homogeneity of official writing, and undermining and exposing the postcolonial political elite to the scrutiny of outsiders'.[85]

If one is to follow this distinction, it seems that the aesthetics of *Le Pleurer-rire*, with its satire of dictatorship, its intertextual references, and complex structure belong to

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Prix littéraire d'Afrique Noire, on a parlé de toute son œuvre à la radio et à la télévision, y compris de "L'Etat honteux".

Quoted in Alain Brezault and Gérard Clavreuil, 'L'écriture au bistouri de Tchichelle Tchivela (entretien)', *Notre Librairie*, 1988, 139-143 (p. 143).

[83] Article 19 (Organization), *Freedom of Information and Expression in the Congo: A Commentary by Article 19 on the Report Submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Committee by the Government Of the Congo*, Article 19 Commentaries on Freedom of Information and Expression, No.4 (London: Article 19, 1987), pp. 31-32.

[84] Thomas, p. 51.

[85] Ibid., pp. 51 and 6.

the second kind of literature. However, in Thomas's classification, non-official writers are also politically subversive, and he describes them as '*avant-garde* resistance authors', adding between parentheses that they have been 'sometimes censored, and almost exclusively published abroad'.[86] His reading is therefore centred on the tension that arises between *Le Pleurer-rire*'s visible subversion of official literary norms and Lopes's own 'status inside the very power structure his work subverts and challenges'.[87] Indeed, for Thomas, 'this presents somewhat of a contradiction, given the inevitable collaborationist complicity that such a position entails with the ruling elite'.[88] Thomas's reading constitutes a relentless attempt to try and solve this contradiction, which he achieves by recasting the novel as a 'confessional and testimonial narrative', through which Lopes supposedly re-examines his own collaboration with the regime.[89]

As I mentioned before, Lopes has always denied that what is described in *Le Pleurer-rire* is a reflection of his own political experience, going as far as to claim: 'I myself have not collaborated with anyone who resembles the Daddy character in my novel'.[90] To this, Thomas retorts that 'historical facts do not corroborate this statement and many Congolese citizens who lived under the authoritarian rule of Ngouabi, Yhombi-Opango, and Sassou Nguesso would disagree with Lopes's comparative standard for abuse'.[91] Furthermore, Thomas points out that 'While Lopes has resorted to the veil of allegory to structure his narrative, a number of references do nevertheless make the text specific to the Congo'.[92] Indeed, not only is the dictatorial atmosphere of the novel reminiscent of the realities of Congo-Brazzaville during Lopes's participation in the government, but some specific episodes might be invoked to justify Thomas's reading of *Le Pleurer-rire* as an autobiographical account.

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[86] Ibid., p. 5.

[87] Ibid., p. 90.

[88] Ibid., p. 91.

[89] Ibid., p. 90.

[90] Quoted in Ibid., p. 83.

[91] Ibid., p. 112.

[92] Ibid., p. 102.

Thus, Bwakamabé's proclivity to blame the communists (or indeed any other '-ists') for every manifestation of political opposition mirrors the heavy-handed instrumentalization of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric by the regime of Brazzaville. For instance, an important development in the plot concerns a failed *coup d'état* orchestrated by Colonel Haraka, who manages to escape and is hunted by the government. The narrative details the violent press campaign organized against Haraka, who is of course accused of being Moscow's agent. The novel also describes the desperate attempts to capture him (these include the hiring of sorcerers and astrologers), and we are told that the security services have decided that only Haraka's accomplices would be judged, while 'Haraka réunissait suffisamment de preuves contre lui pour que son exécution eût lieu avant son procès' (188). Haraka will indeed end up executed during a tragicomic episode in which it is discovered that he was hiding by dressing up as a woman – a fact that is revealed after a soldier tries to rape him (208).[93] These fictional events may remind us of the failed military coup which was attempted in the Congo by a group led by Ange Diawara in 1972. Just as Maître is briefly captured by the rebels, Lopes too was allegedly kidnapped by Diawara and his accomplices.[94] Like Haraka, Diawara initially managed to escape and hide, became the object of a violent campaign, and was eventually caught and killed in April 1973.[95] Although Diawara could only be judged *in absentia*, he and

[93] This version of events is later corrected by 'le jeune compatriote', who considers it apocryphal (213-214).

[94] This is the version of the events given by René Gauze, a member of the French security police based in Congo at the time: 'Early in the morning of February 22, 1972, Congolese listeners heard martial music broadcast over their radios – the sure sign of a coup d'état. During the night, Diawara, Matoumpo-Mpolo, and their followers kidnapped three of Ngouabi's staunchest supporters (Nze, Moudileno-Massengo, and Lopez [sic])' *The Politics of Congo-Brazzaville by René Gauze. Translation, Editing and Supplement by Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1973), p. 184.

[95] The fictional press campaign of Aziz Sonika against Haraka is actually far subtler and milder than the fiery rhetoric of the historical campaign against Diawara. Diawara (to whom the P.C.T.'s official newspaper *Etumba* usually referred as 'le sinitre Ange Diawara' or 'l'Ange exterminateur') was accused of being an admirer of Hitler, bent on destroying the entire Congolese people: 'Le couteau entre les dents, Ange Diawara et les autres brutes sanguinaires qui ont fait de l'idéologie marxiste un écran de fumée derrière lequel ils préparaient la vente aux enchères impérialistes de notre beau pays, étaient prêts à sacrifier notre peuple dans un effrayant holocauste'. Other alleged signs of Diawara's corrupt and dangerous personality included his fondness for Western cultural products, such as Spaghetti Westerns, or his admiration for Tintin, Ombrax, and Zorro, through which he was said to 's'inoculer lui-même le poison de l'idéologie décadente que diffusent ces publications dans lesquelles le héros est toujours un personnage blanc, ce qui est un facteur de déculturation pour les lecteurs de race noire'. 'Portrait d'un criminel: l'Ange exterminateur du peuple: Diawara', *Etumba* (Brazzaville, 26 March 1972), p. 5 (p. 5).

his companions had been condemned by a military court in 1972, which, incidentally, was presided over by Henri Lopes.[96]

Another example of potential echoes between the fiction and Congolese realities can be found in an episode where two young white activists, a woman and a teacher, are accused of subversive activities against Bwakamabé. Maître describes the two characters by paraphrasing a virulent editorial published in the official press: 'La fille en jean était évidemment une *trottoire* [prostitute] qui cherchait à assouvir sa soif sexuelle dans une action d'un romantisme au goût douteux', while the man, 'Le Français chevelu, vulgaire, "gauchiste rescapé de mai 68"', is accused of 'vouloir tenter dans notre "beau Pays", une expérience qui avait piteusement échoué dans le sien propre' (131). As usual, both are said to be 'Moscow's agents' and are suspected of seeking to organize orgies with their students, 'dans la tradition honteuse des bacchanales modernes pratiquées par les sociétés décadentes' (131). This episode resonates with an article published in *Etumba* in March 1973, on the theme of 'Comment les gauchistes français ont mouillé dans le complot contre la révolution congolaise'. Three young French teachers were accused of having been involved in Diawara's coup. The article was illustrated with pictures of the alleged conspirators, and the young man (who sports a wild mane of hair), is described as a teacher of 'subversive mathematics', while the caption under the picture of one of the women reads: 'Prof de Français [sic], trempée jusqu'au cou'. The rest of the article argues:

> ces petits français [sic] qui n'ont de tradition révolutionnaire du peuple français que le désordre qu'ils incarnent et le Hachich qu'il [sic] fument, veulent rééditer "l'exploit" de De Brazza. Mais hélas ! Les Temps [sic] changent et la société se développe. […] Une raison de plus que le Congo ne peut recevoir une leçon de Révolution des jeunes français qui n'ont

[96] Both the fictional and the real cases were heard in private by military courts. In the Diawara trial, according to *Etumba*, 9 people received a death penalty *in absentia* (including Diawara who was already dead), 14 others (including the writer Maxime N'débeka) received death sentences, and 30 were condemned to life imprisonment. Nearly all the death penalties were converted into life sentences by President Marien N'Gouabi, as a gesture of clemency. Gauze states however that 'It was reported that 1,500 were arrested and some tortured, but the official account stated that only three persons had been killed and 169 imprisoned'. See 'Publication des verdicts de la Cour Martiale pour les participants au putsch manqué du 22 Février 1972', *Etumba* (Brazzaville, 8 avril 1972), p. 1 (p. 1); Gauze, p. 184.

> découvert la théorie marxiste qu'avec le "Mai 1968" alors que le peuple congolais en avait déclenché le processus cinq ans auparavant.[97]

Yet it is not clear what kind of critical moves these echoes (which are obviously subject to interpretation) authorize. There is a vast distance, which is quickly crossed in Thomas's account, between the possibility that (some) readers will detect such similarities and the definition of the text as a 'confession' or an autobiography. Starting from what he considers the 'avant-garde' aspects of the book, Thomas sets out to invent Lopes's political persona, attributing to him feelings (guilt) and desires (curbing political action from the inside). For instance, we read that the polyvocality of the text allows Lopes 'to address the question of the exercise of political power in a Francophone postcolony while also justifying his participation', whereas the last words of the novel are said to 'address the question of trauma in a very significant way, situating his writing as a liberating act'.[98] The concluding lines of Thomas's analysis even contend that 'writing for Lopes has become a therapeutic and purging experience, enabling him to confront his feelings of guilt and helplessness'.[99] This leads Thomas to reverse the terms of his initial paradox and to argue that Lopes's exercise of political power actually makes the novel even more politically subversive: 'If Lopes's text is to be categorized as a work of resistance, aligned with other non-official authors, then one could argue that his objective to undermine the authorities becomes all the more effective, given his understanding of the workings of power'.[100] The circularity of this argument emerges clearly when Thomas speculates on Lopes's intentions and objectives in order to argue that he could not have left his own experience out of the narrative: 'He would have nothing to achieve (or prove for that matter) were he to deliberately exclude his experiences; on the

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[97] 'Comment les gauchistes français ont mouillé dans le complot contre la révolution congolaise', *Etumba*, 1973, pp. 3-5 (p. 3).

[98] Thomas, pp. 109 and 110.

[99] Ibid., p. 120. David N'Zitoukoulou proposed a similar interpretation, arguing:

> En définitive 'Le Pleurer-Rire' doit être lu comme l'auto-critique de son auteur car pour avoir collaboré avec ceux qu'il critique aujourd'hui, Lopes s'est sali les mains à tout jamais. Pour être un réquisitoire, ce roman ne l'est pas du tout. C'est plutôt d'une plaidoirie qu'il s'agit. Car il est fort probable que le narrateur ait pris l'initiative de rédiger ce récit pamphlétaire à la suite d'un douloureux examen de conscience. On n'oublie pas facilement une décennie de services dans un régime qui se qualifie démagogiquement 'populaire et révolutionnaire'. Les longues années de collaboration avec le régime de Brazzaville ont laissé une tache indélébile dans la conscience du romancier. N'Zitoukoulou, 113-116 (pp. 115-116).

[100] Thomas, p. 100.

contrary, they add weight to the narrator's observations and accord Lopes a perspective other authors do not have'.[101] As these statements on Lopes's supposed 'objective' exemplifies, Thomas is not so much using Lopes's biography to interpret the book as he is reconstructing Lopes's intentions and personality to make them fit with his perception of the text's subversiveness: *Le Pleurer-rire* parodies dictatorship, hence Lopes must have been a secret opponent of the Congolese regime.

But at several points in his argument, Thomas's attempt to read the text as an autobiographical account seems to place an untenable pressure on his interpretation of the novel. For instance, Thomas suggests that a degree of veracity can be granted to the narrator's observations, and that it 'serves to further legitimate them as we begin to sense their proximity to Lopes's own sentiments'.[102] Looking for proof of this veracity within the text, Thomas comments on the final intervention of Maître's mistress, Soukali, in a passage entitled 'quand Soukali enjambe la fenêtre du roman ou (au choix) de la réalité' (369-371). His argument is that 'Soukali's extra-textual interjection at the end of the novel adds legitimacy to the narrator's argument to the extent that her recognition of the fictional space in question lends veracity to the narrative'.[103] This assertion is backed up by an extensive quotation of the passage, which reads as follows:

> Despite a few transpositions, your friends will have no difficulty in recognizing every one of the actors under their masks... If the names and places sound strange to our ears, even though you leave here and there in the text the words of an imaginary dialect of your invention, the most myopic of moles would recognize 'the country'... There is scarcely as much difference between your story and our lives as between a Van Gogh, a Cézanne or a Modigliani and a photograph of the original model. But the magic and teaching power of art, isn't it less to resemble reality than to lend reality the colours of the painter's heart?[104]

[101] Ibid., p. 100.

[102] Thomas, p. 100.

[103] Ibid., p. 101.

[104] Quoted in Ibid., p. 101. Thomas's ellipses. The original version in French reads:

> Malgré les transpositions, tes familiers n'auront aucune peine à reconnaître chacun des acteurs sous leurs grimaces. […]

One might suspect that the implication that there is little difference between a painting by Van Gogh, Cézanne or Modigliani and a photograph should not be taken entirely at face value. Indeed, the irony of this passage becomes obvious if one reintroduces the passages Thomas has edited from the quotation through the use of ellipses. In these passages, Soukali argues that 'Tonton est évidemment le préfet célèbre d'une province où vécut trois ans durant un jeune cardiologue, alors fraîchement émoulu des universités européennes, et à qui je confie aujourd'hui le soin de ma santé' (369).[105] She goes on to explain that she is having an affair with this young cardiologist and hopes that her students won't recognize her, thereby suggesting that she is actually a teacher (370). All these elements create a parody of dénouement: they do not point toward any sort of recognizable reality, but add yet another layer of opacity by bringing in a completely new, blatantly irrelevant (and probably fictional) plot line. Far from being an encouragement to identify the novel with a given historical context, or to see it as a truthful testimony, this passage mocks those readings that would turn the *Le Pleurer-rire* into a *roman à clef,* and gestures toward an infinity of real or imagined contexts with which the novel might resonate. This is emphasized by Maître's response to Soukali in the last lines of the novel, which insist: 'je n'ai rien emprunté à la réalité ni non plus inventé' (371).

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Thus, a large part of the 'contradiction' that Dominic Thomas seeks to resolve only emerges because his distinction between official and non-official writers rests on the notion that aesthetic subversiveness and political resistance necessarily go together.

> Même si les noms de personnes et de lieux sonnent étrangers à nos oreilles, même si tu livres ça et là, dans le texte, des mots d'un dialecte imaginaire, forgé par toi seul, la plus myope des taupes reconnaîtra "Le Pays".
>
> Il y a entre ton histoire et notre actualité, à peine plus de différence qu'entre un Van Gogh, un Cézanne ou un Modigliani et la photographie du modèle originel. Mais la magie et la puissance pédagogique de l'art n'est-elle justement pas moins de ressembler à la réalité que de donner à la réalité les couleurs du cœur du peintre ? (369-370)

[105] In the English translation Thomas is quoting from: 'Daddy is obviously the celebrated prefect of a certain province, which was inhabited for three years by a young heart specialist, then fresh from university in Europe, to whom I now entrust the care of my health'. Henri Lopes, *The Laughing Cry: An African Cock and Bull Story*, trans. by Gerald Moore (London: Readers International, 1987), p. 101.

Indeed, Thomas seems extremely reluctant to consider the possibility that the new 'aesthetic articulations' of avant-garde authors might not necessarily 'undermine and expose the postcolonial political elite to the scrutiny of outsiders', and that such 'articulations' might also protect some of them against such scrutiny.[106] In this respect, it should be pointed out that his construction of the category of the 'non-official' writer merely reverses the systematic equivalence between literary aesthetics and politics that is posited by the socialist realism of Congolese 'official writers', and fails to question the foundation of such equivalences.

However, the way out of these equivocations is not so easy to find. Politicized approaches to literary texts, such as postcolonial criticism, seem to preclude the separation between the author and his or her work that is often advocated in other fields of literary criticism, more openly invested in aesthetic value (and in which, at least in the Francophone context, Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* often serves as a heroic inaugural moment). For instance, not only have postcolonial critics questioned the way in which notions of literary autonomy or universal value have shielded canonical authors from political and biographical scrutiny,[107] but as Nicholas Harrison argues, postcolonial criticism tends to rely on a specific 'author-function', in which the identification of an author as 'postcolonial' is based on biographical, and more precisely ethno-racial, considerations:

> The notion of the "francophone author" or of the "postcolonial novelist" thus designates a certain "author-function", to use the term offered by Foucault in his famous essay "What is an author?": *particular* aspects of the author's real or imagined biography, in this instance including notably "race" or national origins, are seen by the reader as pertinent to the text, and as providing a legitimate or even crucial means of making sense of it.[108]

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[106] Thomas, pp. 51.

[107] For instance, in 1994 Peter Hulme wrote on the need for postcolonial critics to interrogate 'the vast critical enterprise – starting in the case of *Wuthering heights* with Charlotte Brontë herself – which produced the novels of the Brontës as works of genius unconnected with the conditions of their production and sheered from the materials which went into the making of them, materials already shot through with colonial colours'. Peter Hulme, 'The Locked Heart: The Creole Family Romance of Wide Sargasso Sea', in *Colonial Discourse, Postcolonial Theory*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 72-88 (p. 85).

[108] Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 104.

These aspects in turn determine the types of question to which the texts will be subjected, and play a crucial role in situating critics' interpretation in relation to the political referents of postcolonial criticism. Indeed, even in the first part of this chapter, the questions I raised concerning the relation of the text to issues of cultural authenticity and language were determined by my identification of the writer as 'African', and 'postcolonial'. If we admit that the reasons why we may become interested in Lopes's text have in part to do with an interest in the political realities that constitute its subject matter, it seems difficult to ignore Lopes's life altogether, as it is one of the channels through which his text can be connected to those realities.

However, although Thomas's reading seems to conform to this approach, in practice, the way in which his interpretation of *Le Pleurer-rire*'s aesthetics comes to shape his account of Lopes's biography (rather than the opposite) suggests both a certain reluctance to reduce the text to the intentions and personal circumstances of its author and a difficulty in engaging explicitly with the origins of this reluctance. I would argue that these hesitations have to do precisely with an unacknowledged attachment to the notion of literary autonomy that politicized approaches seem to question. As Deepika Bahri writes, 'The liberation of the text for interpretation beyond its pragmatic context constitutes some of what we have come to recognize as the ideological power of literature', and 'freeing the text from transparent auctorial intention' is a crucial aspect of this literary 'liberation'.[109] Thomas's attempt to reconcile Lopes's text and his biography is thus a means of concealing the tensions between, on the one hand, his investment in literary aesthetics (which leads Thomas to provide an interpretation that does not actually reduce the novel to the historical and political facts of the author's life) and, on the other hand, his political argument (which brings Thomas to offer a revisionist account of Lopes's intentions in order to reconcile his 'literary' interpretation with his apparently political perspective).

This selective attention to postcolonial authors' real-world actions has been the object of severe critiques, notably from Chris Bongie, who recently launched a series of controversial discussions about figures such as Edouard Glissant and Lyonel Trouillot. The latter case is particularly resonant with the issues raised in this

[109] Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 80.

chapter: relying on a number of biographical and historical elements, Bongie accuses Trouillot of using literary fiction to disguise his own partisan agenda as democratic. According to Bongie, Trouillot belongs to a group of 'conservative intellectuals whose seemingly benign appeals to "civil society" tacitly promote the interests of the neo-liberalizing/colonizing nation states that overthrew Aristide as well as those of the unelectable politicians and industrialists in Haiti who supported the coup'.[110] Bongie's misgivings are particularly directed against a recent reading of Trouillot's *Bicentenaire* by Martin Munro, who argues that the novel is an attempt to rethink the cycle of 'hatred and revenge' in Haitian history, and that Trouillot's work, by underlining the various forms of 'interdependence' that connect the different social classes of Haiti 'is pushing toward a more complex understanding of personal and collective identity and destiny in Haiti, and [...] thereby offers a potential way out of the repetitive, circular history that revenge engenders'.[111] According to Bongie, Munro's interpretation of the novel de-historicizes it and obfuscates the 'anti-Aristide agenda' that is 'insinuated' through its pages:

> What soon becomes clear to anyone with a modicum of knowledge of the text, and of contemporary Haitian history, is that Munro is able to ground his approving emphasis on archipelagic "interdependence" in the novel only through an extremely distorted presentation/occlusion of its historical framework. […] What we have here is an obvious diversion away from what the novel is actually representing, namely the student protests that month against Aristide's government, part of a wave of anti-government protests that took place in the months leading up to the coup, and which were in turn repeatedly "dwarfed" by pro-government rallies.[112]

Bongie therefore argues that in failing to link the demonstrations represented in the novel to the real anti-Aristide protests that took place, and by turning them into an example of 'interdependence', Munro is in fact bolstering the 'anti-Aristide' (and,

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[110] Chris Bongie, '(Not) Razing the Walls: Glissant, Trouillot and the Post-Politics of World "Literature"', in *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-Monde*, ed. by Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 125-145 (p. 134).

[111] Martin Munro, 'Interdependence and Intertextuality in Lyonel Trouillot's *Bicentenaire*', *Small Axe*, 12 (2008), 42-52 (p. 43).

[112] Bongie, '(Not) Razing the Walls', pp. 125-145 (p. 136). However, if the fact that the novel is 'actually representing' the anti-Aristide protests is indeed so 'obvious' and 'clear', then Bongie's teasing out of this context is probably superfluous, since the majority of Munro's readers are likely to be other specialists of Haitian literature, i.e. people who do possess 'a modicum of knowledge of the text, and of contemporary Haitian history'.

according to Bongie, 'anti-democratic') content of the text. This, for Bongie, is representative of a more general attitude in postcolonial criticism:

> Our exemplary literary critic's unwillingness to move beyond Trouillot's own flattering self-representation as a "non-partisan" author, a man possessed of a self-evident "respect of democratic norms", is not idiosyncratic but exemplary of a generalized tendency in (Francophone) postcolonial studies to avoid any full reckoning with the scribal dimension of "literature" in its institutional status and the strategies of legitimization through which it perpetuates itself.[113]

However, one may wonder what this 'full reckoning' would imply. It may be tempting at this point to emphasize all that would be lost, were we to simply dismiss the elaboration of a literary fiction as 'diversionary tactics'.[114] But this would of course only confirm what Bongie considers (in this article at least) a misplaced investment in 'the speculative fiction of literary value'.[115] It is therefore more strategic to wonder what exactly would be gained through such an approach. Indeed, if the aim is to denounce the political duplicity of a number of postcolonial intellectuals, and to expose how claims to 'literary greatness' legitimize and authorize their political interventions, the only way to avoid condoning their 'de-historicizing moves' would consist in refusing to read them 'literarily' and to reject their claims to fictionality. But if we sacrifice our investment in aesthetic value and autonomy in the name of political responsibility, then, as I suggested earlier, it is not clear why we should spend any more time on texts such as *Bicentenaire* or *Le Pleurer-rire* (let alone on other academics' interpretations of these novels). For instance, attempting to evaluate more clearly what Lopes's historical role has been, fleshing out the very incomplete account I outlined in this second part of the chapter and trying to establish clear responsibilities might seem a more politically valuable activity – in which a close analysis of *Le Pleurer-rire* would play a limited role.

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[113] Bongie, '(Not) Razing the Walls', pp. 125-145 (p. 142). Bongie defines the scribe as 'the cultural producer who represents, for better and worse, the interests of the leader (or the interest of some other partisan force intent upon displacing that leader)'. Ibid., p. 140.

[114] Ibid., p. 137.

[115] Ibid., p. 142. This polemical piece seems to contradict some of the insights developed by Bongie in *Friends and Enemies*, notably the argument that: 'we (as literary critics) need to come to terms with the fact that if "postcolonial literature" matters, it matters first and foremost as literature'. Bongie, *Friends and Enemies*, p. 21.

This does not imply that Bongie's remarks are irrelevant, quite the contrary, but that both Bongie's reconnection of Munro's reading with Trouillot's politics and my own biographical corrective to the interpretation of Lopes's text are only interesting as complements to the readings they dispute. It is only if we primarily care about the task of interpreting *Bicentenaire* or *Le Pleurer-rire* that criticizing these interpretations can be relevant. Or to put it otherwise: we cannot claim for our critiques of these interpretations a different source of legitimacy than the one that prompted them in the first place, i.e. an (overt or covert) attachment to the aesthetic value of literature. Bongie's remarks do not matter because of their political import, but rather because they underline some troubling contradictions within the practice of literary criticism and shed new light on the text at hand. A 'reckoning' with the 'scribal' dimension of literature can therefore only be partial and self-contradictory. In the case of Lopes, it may appear important to discuss the potential tensions that arise between, for instance, a text-based analysis of the representation of censorship (in which the 'avertissement' might be read as a 'subversive' parody, undermining both censorship and the expectations it creates) and the actual relation with censorship that the text might have had in real life (in the light of which the 'avertissement' might be interpreted as an exploitation of the trope of censorship in order to conceal the real political role of the author). But we cannot escape the paradox that it is precisely an attachment to literature as such that leads us to probe the limits of our own literary interpretations.

2

The Trouble with Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

My discussion of Lopes in the previous chapter emphasized the necessity to distinguish between our political and aesthetic investments in texts, highlighting the tensions and contradictions that arise when critics fail to do so. In this second chapter and in the next one, I will both extend and nuance this argument, by showing how an awareness of this theoretical distinction needs to be combined with an attention to the fact that these investments are not only interdependent at a theoretical level, as I suggested in my discussion of Chris Bongie's article, but also intertwined in the ways we experience and interpret texts. This chapter will explore these issues by examining Achebe's treatment of postcolonial dictatorship in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah.*[116] By comparing *Anthills* with the model of the 'roman à thèse', which was analysed by Susan Suleiman in *Authoritarian Fictions*, I will argue that in Achebe's novel, the deciphering of a political message and its destabilization by 'literary' interpretations operate in close relation to each other, as two coexisting polarities of the reader's experience.

The work of Chinua Achebe constitutes an inescapable point of reference if one is to consider the relations between the political and the aesthetic in the context of postcolonial Africa. The seminal role played by Achebe, both as a writer and as a theorist, has been crucial in shaping debates about African literature, and his attempt to define the role of the African writer against Western representations of the aesthetic remains widely influential. Achebe thus offers an interesting counterpoint

[116] Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987). All references are to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses.

to Lopes's position, as his reflexions on literature have long been characterized by a deep scepticism, or even hostility, vis-à-vis the notion of aesthetic autonomy (as suggested by his scathing remark that 'Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit').[117] His arguments have often opposed the social function of African arts and literature to what he describes as the disempowering and individualistic conception of art in Western societies:

> In the beginning, art was good and useful; it always had its airy and magical qualities, of course; but even the magic was often intended to minister to a basic human need, to serve a down-to-earth necessity, as when the cavemen drew pictures on the rock of animals they hoped to kill in their next hunt!
>
> But somewhere in the history of European civilization the idea that art should be accountable to no one, and needed to justify itself to nobody except itself, began to emerge. In the end it became a minor god and its devotees became priests...[118]

Achebe's comments, like many similar discourses that oppose Western and African literatures, insist on the divided character of Western societies.[119] This division, generally attributed to the prevalence of modern scientific thought and/or capitalism, implies the separation of ethics and aesthetics, art and politics, or of the artist and society, and is opposed to the unity between the work of art and the world that is said to characterize African cultures. Consequently, in Achebe's argument, African art is the product of society in its entirety and the artist is one member of the community among others: 'There is no rigid barrier between the makers of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all and is a "function" of society'.[120] This insistence on the functional role of art was most famously expressed in Achebe's 1965 essay 'The Novelist as Teacher', which asserted that the vocation of the African novelist was to teach Africans about the positive aspects of their own past:

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[117] Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day*, p. 29.

[118] Ibid., p. 30.

[119] Many similar arguments could be mentioned. For instance, in her 1965 study of African literature, Lilyan Kesteloot claimed: 'Au contact des écrivains noirs, nous [occidentaux] retrouvons la dimension collective de la littérature et l'esprit fonctionnel de l'art primitif, où le beau et l'utile ne sont pas encore désunis, où l'on ne sépare pas l'éthique de l'esthétique'. Lilyan Kesteloot, *Les Ecrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature*, 2nd edn (Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1965), p. 420. This opposition between divided and unified societies can also be found in Fredric Jameson's much debated essay 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 17 (1986), 65-88.

[120] Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day*, p. 34.

> I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.[121]

These declarations raise difficult issues for literary critics, as Achebe's ambition to appropriate the tools of literary representation, and more specifically the genre of the novel, in order to pursue an agenda radically opposed to the notion of aesthetic autonomy leaves open the question of the interpretive models one should use in order to make sense of his novels.

These questions have been central to the study of African literatures more generally and have been the object of intense discussions since the inception of the field. Some critics have argued that 'Western' theory is not able to account for African artistic productions and have called for a differentiated mode of engagement with them.[122] In his classic 1972 study *The Emergence of African Fiction*, Charles Larson complained that the reception of African literature had often been polarized between benevolent, anthropological approaches that privileged the ethnographic content of the texts, and a dismissive attitude on the part of Western literary critics, who focused on their own notions of aesthetic value without attending to the cultural specificities of these texts: 'One might generalize by saying that the anthropologists have reviewed African writers favourably because they have been interested in African cultures per se, and the literary-trained critics have been unsympathetic simply because they have attempted to force the African writer into a Western literary tradition to which he does not always belong'.[123] Larson described this as 'a problem of comparative aesthetics' and argued for a new form of literary interpretation that would not overlook the 'literariness' of African fiction but would 'look at African writing not only for whatever its similarities with Western literary forms may be, but also – once

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[121] Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day*, p. 72.

[122] On this issue, see also Rand Bishop, 'African Literature, Western Critics [1988]', in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 414-421.

[123] Charles R. Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 14. For an argument in favour of a 'literary-anthropological' approach to African literature, see also Christopher L. Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

we have fully identified these – for what is different, and therefore, African'.[124] This idea of an irreducible cultural difference has led to various attempts at 'africanizing' literary theory. One could mention for instance Zadi Zaourou's redefinition of Jakobson's functions of language.[125] Zaourou argued that in the context of an African 'national renaissance', using Western theories to analyse African literature would be illegitimate and contradictory.[126] Drawing from both myths and works of anthropology, he asserted that the African view of the universe is 'unitary', and that language is not separated from the world but part of it, as a fundamental 'inseminating force'.[127] As a consequence, the African view of language transcends all the oppositions at work in Western theory:

> Dans le contexte d'un tel mode de pensée, l'unité des contraires est loi commune et quotidienne et cette loi s'affirme partout. En linguistique, elle consacre, d'un point de vue pratique, la réduction de la contradiction entre signifié et signifiant, entre contenu et forme dans la parole littéraire, entre création artistique unifiée et enracinement dans la communauté des hommes.[128]

This in turn led him to claim the existence of two specifically African functions of language: the 'symbolic' and 'rhythmic' functions, both of which are said to illustrate the close link between language and society.

More recently, the political, cultural and economic violence underlining the emergence of African literature and 'non-Western' literatures in general has been explored anew by Nicholas Brown in his 2005 book *Utopian Generations*. Brown emphasizes that the inclusiveness of the concept of 'World Literature' tends to conceal that cultures occupy asymmetrical positions within the structures of global capitalism. According to Brown, the prevalence of the concept of 'literature' in the

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[124] Larson, p. 26. Larson's tendency to define African specificity in relation to its differences with the 'Western model' has been strongly criticized by Achebe, who denounced Larson as one example of what he called 'colonialist criticism' and suggested that Larson implicitly assimilates Western literature to universality. This article ended by enjoining African critics to 'take control' of African literary criticism. Chinua Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), pp. 46-61 (pp. 51-52).

[125] Zadi Zaourou, 'Expérience africaine de la parole: problèmes théoriques de l'application de la linguistique à la littérature', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines*, 9 (1975), 449-478.

[126] Ibid., p. 478.

[127] Ibid., p. 456.

[128] Ibid., p. 466.

interpretation of cultural contents of various geographical and historical origins is the result of a process of cultural homogenization, which has led to the eradication of genuine cultural diversity:

> If world literature does not spring spontaneously from a host of freely developing cultural equals but rather represents the exploitation of geographic and cultural diversity by a limited ensemble of economic and cultural forms, we might ask to what extent "non-Western literature" is a contradiction in terms. [...] Can we say of the *Inkishafi* (a verse meditation occasioned by the passing of the city-state of Pate in what is now Kenya, by the late classical Swahili poet Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir) that we do not work a well-intended but nonetheless violent transformation by understanding it with reference to the concept of literature? What we usually call "non-Western" literature is rarely the expression (like the *Inkishafi*) of some other culture, if by that we understand some other set of norms and rules that has developed along its own internal logic; rather, it must be thought of in terms of the positions that economically, ethnically, sexually, and geographically differentiated subjects occupy within the single culture of global capitalism that has more or less ruthlessly subsumed what was once a genuinely multicultural globe.[129]

To such conceptions, other critics have opposed the necessity of engaging more fully with the 'literariness' of African texts, and have denounced the tendency of critics to reduce African writers to the status of native informants. These arguments became frequent in the 1980s, when nationalist theories of culture and language were increasingly challenged. Thus, in *La Littérature africaine et sa critique* (1986), Locha Mateso complained:

> Lorsqu'on entreprend de lire les ouvrages de critique littéraire africaine produits ces vingt dernières années, on constate une certaine identité dans la manière de structurer les matières traitées. L'une des singularités de cette critique réside dans l'attention quasi-exclusive accordée aux auteurs et à la réalité africaine qu'ils sont censés décrire, plutôt qu'aux œuvres elles-mêmes.[130]

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[129] Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 6.

[130] Locha Mateso, *La littérature africaine et sa critique* (Paris: A.C.C.T, 1986), p. 153. Such discussions have been particularly frequent in the Francophone field. For other interventions casting doubt on the relevance of political readings of African writers see Guy Ossito Midiohouan, *L'Idéologie dans la littérature négro-africaine d'expression française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986) and, more recently, Odile M. Cazenave, *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

According to him, this approach reproduced the attitude of colonial powers toward the literary production of colonized people, which systematically emphasized the informative dimension of literature at the expense of aesthetics: 'L'héritage colonial subsiste néanmoins sous la forme insidieuse d'un discours condescendant et louangeur polarisé par la "négritude" des auteurs. Cette critique n'a souvent cure de la valeur intrinsèque des œuvres. C'est l'auteur en tant que noir qui est visé et consacré. […] La littérature africaine n'est plus qu'un témoignage sur l'africanité ou la négritude'.[131] In Mateso's view, by refusing to address African texts as aesthetic productions, critics were denying African literature the dignity of full-fledged artistic production and, paradoxically, the impulse to characterize African literature as a political discourse led to the reproduction of colonial attitudes.

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Anthills of the Savannah represents an interesting focus for these issues, as the novel was written at a time when the cultural nationalism that underpinned much of Achebe's famous critical positions had reached a crisis, following the tragic evolution of many African states after independence.[132] When *Anthills* was first published in 1987, more than twenty years had passed since the publication of Achebe's previous novel, *A Man of the People* (1966). In this period of deep political instability, Nigeria had experienced several military coups and three years of a traumatic civil war (1967-1970) following the secession of the South-eastern region of Biafra, which was eventually reintegrated into the state. Achebe, himself a member of the Igbo ethnic group that is in the majority in Eastern Nigeria, was strongly involved in supporting Biafra's independence and in promoting its cause. This context played a central role in the reception of *Anthills*, as many attributed Achebe's long silence as a novelist to 'the unmanageableness of this social and

[131] Mateso, pp. 205-206.

[132] This evolution has notably been discussed by Neil Lazarus, according to whom after independence 'a rhetoric of disillusion began to replace the earlier utopian rhetoric in [African writers'] work: it emerged as fatalism or despair or anger or in the accusation that postcolonial leaders had betrayed the '"African revolution"', and by Nicholas Brown, who considers that 'the great period of utopian anticolonial literature in Africa is followed in the postcolonial moment by a literature of corruption, of stagnation – to a surprising degree, a literature of feces'. Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. ix; Brown, p. 23.

political turmoil as a subject for fiction', wondering whether Nigeria's recent history would lead to a revision of his positions on the social and political role of the writer.[133] In some of his statements following the publication of the text, Achebe did appear quite keen to nuance his earlier positions. For instance, in a 1987 conversation with Jane Wilkinson, he went back to the notion of 'the novelist as teacher' to disavow the way it had been received: 'I was not thinking of the kind of teacher who prescribes. A good teacher never prescribes; he *draws out*. Education is a drawing out of what is there, leading out, helping the pupil to discover, to explore...'[134] However, his comparison, a few lines earlier, between the novelist and 'the great teachers, like Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Buddha or Plato' should deter us from overstating his reconsideration of writers' social relevance.[135]

Anthills is also a particularly appropriate object of inquiry because of the prominent place it gives to the role of intellectuals and of literature. Indeed, a striking feature of *Anthills of the Savannah* compared to many novels that deal with dictatorship is the somewhat peripheral role played by the dictator. The novel is set in a fictional country named Kangan, in which Sam, the Army Commander, has been brought to power by a coup. But the real focus of the narrative is the tragic fate of three intellectuals in his entourage, Ikem, Chris and Beatrice, who all act as narrators at some point in the text. Ikem and Chris are former school friends of Sam's; they hold degrees from Europe, and occupy important functions: Chris as Commissioner for Information, and Ikem as the editor of the *National Gazette*. Beatrice, a beautiful and bright woman who became a close friend of Ikem's while studying in London, is Chris's girlfriend. Sam is only a secondary character, mostly described from the outside, through the vision of the other characters (except for the second chapter, in which a third-person narration espouses his point of view). Sam's main function in the narrative is to provide an object through which the three main characters' conflicting and changing perceptions of Kangan's political situation are rendered

[133] David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe, Novelist, Poet, Critic*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 167. Thus, according to Jago Morrison, *Anthills* reveals that 'the civil war did force Achebe into a long rethink of his earlier positions, and ultimately into a new mode of writing' (*The Fiction of Chinua Achebe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 138).

[134] Jane Wilkinson, 'Interview with Chinua Achebe', in *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp. 141-154 (p. 141).

[135] Ibid., p. 141.

visible. It is thus difficult to get an entirely coherent picture of him: according to Chris, Sam is 'a very intelligent person' (11), whereas Ikem describes him as 'never very bright' (44). Similarly, Chris's narrative in the first chapter depicts Sam as a cruel manipulator, whereas Ikem insists that 'he isn't a monster' (42). By drawing our attention away from the dictator himself to the production of discourses about him, *Anthills* highlights the crisis of the role of the intellectual created by postcolonial dictatorship, and the difficulty of adapting the previous models of intelligibility and narration through which politics was perceived.

As Simon Gikandi suggested, *Anthills* thus represents the postcolonial predicament as a 'crisis of meaning' in which 'the old narratives of liberation, which assumed that the nation would be the fulfilment of human freedom, no longer have legitimacy'.[136] This aspect is reinforced by the complex narrative structure of the novel, which alternates between third-person narratives with various foci and first-person narratives by the three main characters. These frequent shifts of point of view place the emphasis on the difficulty of making sense of the postcolonial situation, which is also at the heart of the characters' concerns. For instance, at the beginning of the first chapter, Chris meditates on his own failure to understand when the situation got out of hand: 'looking back on the last two years it should be possible to point to a specific and decisive event and say: it was at such and such a point that everything went wrong and the rules were suspended. But I have not found such a moment or such a cause although I have sought hard and long for it' (2). Comparably, in Chapter 7, Beatrice's retrospective account of the events starts with her difficulty in finding a beginning: 'For weeks and months after I had definitely taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history as I could lay my hands on I still could not find a way to begin' (75).

The centrality of narration as a theme in the novel is also illustrated by its many references to the role of the 'story'. The topic is discussed when a delegation from Abazon, a rebellious province plagued by drought, travels to the capital in order to ask for the government's help. An elder member of the delegation, who is described in highly positive terms ('the power of his utterance held everyone captive from his

[136] Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language & Ideology in Fiction* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 129.

very first words' (112)) makes a long and highly applauded speech in favour of Ikem, who is also originally from Abazon. Among many statements in praise of story-tellers, the old man argues:

> The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards – each is important in its own way. I tell you there is not one of them we could do without. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather I will say boldly: the story. [...]
>
> Why? Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. (113-114)

It is noteworthy that the story is not celebrated primarily for its aesthetic qualities but for its social and political role in transmitting knowledge and linking together the experiences of past, present and future generations. Furthermore, the use of the term 'story' is significant as it implicitly erases the separation between oral and written literatures and situates Ikem's writings in the continuity of traditional story-telling. This is reminiscent of the many arguments that have attempted to offer a genealogy of modern African literatures grounded in African traditions, and more particularly in oral literature, in order to counter the idea that African writers have simply accommodated Western forms and genres. These issues have remained central to much criticism in the field of African literature, as exemplified by Abiola Irele's contention that:

> The literature in the European languages is now generally recognized, in its formal significance, as an effort to approximate to the oral model, albeit within a literate tradition taken from the West; it is this feature that marks the most important African writing of contemporary times. The point that emerges here is that, through these two channels, the oral tradition continues to function as a fundamental reference of African expression, as the matrix of the African imagination.[137]

[137] Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa & the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 31. For a critical analysis of this vision of orality, see Eileen Julien's much debated argument in *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

This desire to establish a distance from Western notions of literature may find another echo in the novel's depiction of an English editor named Dick. Dick is said to be running a poetry magazine in Soho, entitled *Reject*. This magazine specializes in the publication of manuscripts which have been rejected by other poetry magazines. His Englishness is strongly underlined throughout the passage, and he is first designated as a 'guest from England' (51). His tone is described by Chris as 'offensively patronizing' (52) and his attitude towards Kangan is marked by profound lack of interest and deep ignorance. This, combined with *Reject'*s avant-garde ambitions ('we exploded the pretensions of the poetry establishment and their stuffy party organs' (53); 'the most significant development in British poetry since the war' (53)) may allow for an interpretation of Dick's character as a stand-in for modern (or post-modern) European literature. Thus, the depiction of Dick's confusing expressions could be read as a mockery of modernist celebrations of ambivalence and indeterminacy:

> Actually he has an extremely expressive face if by expressive one means a constant procession of shadowy grimaces all of them indeterminate. You cannot look at him and say: now he is sad, or he is enjoying himself now. You always have to wait and figure it out and still you are not entirely sure. And then all of a sudden you are angry with yourself for letting your mind engage with so much trouble on something so inconsequential. (56)

At this point, one may wonder whether these clues should also be read as indications concerning *Anthills*' own project, in which case it might seem more appropriate to consider the novel as an instance of 'the story' and to privilege its moral, political and social teachings rather than its 'literary' ambiguities. This position has been taken by a number of critics, who have based their interpretation of the novel on Achebe's earlier statements regarding the role of the writer. For instance, Omar Sougou argues that 'In *Anthills of the Savannah,* Achebe remains faithful to the didacticism which he conceives of as being the onus of the writer whose mission precludes non-commitment'.[138] Comparably, Viney Kirpal has argued that:

> Achebe has always seen Nigerian "writers" as the direct descendants of storytellers rather than of literate writers in the Western sense. [...] Therefore, instead of formalistic

[138] Omar Sougou, 'Language, Foregrounding and Intertextuality in *Anthills of the Savannah*', in *Critical Approaches to Anthills of the Savannah*, ed. by Holger G. Ehling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), pp. 35-54 (p. 35).

> experiments and intellectual language games, it is a fictional blueprint for political and social regeneration that Achebe has given us in *Anthills*.[139]

Following a similar approach, David Maughan Brown contends:

> the novel is the fictional product of 21 years of political experience and contemplation on the part of a highly, and deservedly, respected author convinced of the functional obligations of literature and of the writer's duty to teach and lead his or her people, and accordingly it must invite analysis in these terms.[140]

As a consequence, Maughan Brown explains that he will adopt a mode of reading that moves away from notions of aesthetics and literariness in order to privilege the message of the text and its potential ideological impact:

> My intention in this article is to examine, through an analysis of the novel which is more interested in symptomatic readings than purely aesthetic evaluations, the kind of solution proffered, the extent to which it relates to Achebe's non-fictional assertions about the African "masses" and revolution, and the novel's potential for "determining" the course of Nigerian history rather than merely reporting it.[141]

Comparably, this desire to find a political message in *Anthills* has led a number of critics to draw direct links between fiction and reality. Thus, the characters' voices have often been conflated with Achebe's own discourse: 'Achebe presents his thinking most directly through the figure of the controversial editor, Ikem Osodi';[142] 'The main attribute of the "new radicalism" Achebe's fictional surrogate in the novel Ikem Osodi expounds would be...';[143] 'I will concentrate here on the use Achebe makes of Ikem as the primary vehicle for his message';[144] 'Ikem, who embodies the

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[139] '*Anthills of the Savannah*: Postmodern or Postcolonial Novel?' in *South Asian Responses to Chinua Achebe*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors and Bala Kothandaraman (New Delhi: Prestige Books International, 1993), p. 126.

[140] David A. Maughan Brown, '*Anthills of the Savannah*: Achebe's Solution to the "trouble with Nigeria"', in *Critical Approaches to Anthills of the Savannah*, ed. by Holger G. Ehling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), pp. 3-22 (p. 13). For a 'non-literary' discussion of the text's political message, see also the fourth chapter of M. S. C. Okolo, *African Literature as Political Philosophy* (London: Zed, 2007).

[141] Maughan Brown, pp. 3-22 (pp. 6-7).

[142] Larry Diamond, 'Review: Fiction as Political Thought', *African Affairs*, 88 (1989), 435-445 (p. 441).

[143] Govind Narain Sharma 'Beyond Ideology: Achebe's Political Vision in *Anthills of the Savannah*', in Lindfors and Kothandaraman, p. 93.

[144] Maughan Brown, pp. 3-22 (p. 7).

message of Achebe's political ideology'; [145] 'in examining Ikem's, and by extension, Achebe's propositions...';[146] 'It is significant that there is no disguise in Beatrice's origin. She is Igbo like Achebe himself: through her, Achebe states his own position on the woman question'.[147] Likewise, although *Anthills of the Savannah* is set in an imaginary country, Kangan has consistently been treated as interchangeable with Nigeria: 'The oration, and the novel, amount to a sweeping critique of every portion of Kangan's (Nigeria's) elite'; [148] 'Politics in Nigeria, [Achebe] notes in *Anthills*, had no relation to "the lives and concerns of ninety-nine percent of the population"'.[149] These interpretations were strongly influenced by the publication, four years before *Anthills*, of Achebe's non-fictional essay *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), in which Achebe offered a diagnosis of the present situation of the country, insisting particularly on the failure of Nigeria's political leadership. For Neil ten Kortenaar, the novel 'is a working out of Achebe's concerns in *The Trouble with Nigeria*: Nigeria's leaders have placed their own interests before those of the nation'.[150] Pushing the argument further, Charles E. Nnolim even suggests that in the light of *The Trouble with Nigeria*, readers should revise their apprehension of all of Achebe's literary works, as the publishing of this book proves that Achebe's concern is really with Nigerian realities and that too much attention has been paid to the formal aspects of his writing:

> in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Achebe the novelist, finally drops his mask and comes out in *propria persona* to address readers who, over the years, while correctly appreciating the felicities embedded in his story-telling techniques have failed to grasp his message; readers

[145] Okolo, p. 82.

[146] Olusegun Oladipo 'The New Radicalism in *Anthills of the Savannah*' in Arua E. Arua and Olusegun Oladipo, *Two Perspectives on Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah* (Nigeria: RELS Monographs, 1989), p. 17.

[147] Ifi Amadiume, 'Class and Gender in *Anthills of the Savannah* – A Critique', *Okike*, 30 (1990), 147-157 (p. 151).

[148] Diamond, 435-445 (p. 440).

[149] Narain Sharma "Beyond Ideology: Achebe's Political Vision in *Anthills of the Savannah*", 93.

[150] Neil ten Kortenaar, '"Only Connect": *Anthills of the Savannah* and Achebe's The Trouble with Nigeria', in *Aspects of Contemporary World Literature*, ed. by Reddy P. Bayapa (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2008), pp. 167-188 (p. 168).

> who seem to have come to a packed theatre in which great drama is being enacted, and decided only to watch the audience.[151]

Following this interpretation, Nnolim claims that 'in *Anthills of the Savannah,* he [Achebe] demonstrates that he has lost hope in the ability of the military to solve the political and economic problems in Nigeria'.[152] This type of reading can be justified by a number of striking echoes and similarities between Kangan and Nigeria, which have been listed by Neil ten Kortenaar:

> Much of Kangan is recognizably Nigerian. It is located in West Africa on the Niger River. The character's names – Reginald Okong, Beatrice Okoh, Joe Ibe, Ahmed Lango – are plausibly Nigerian and not, for example Ghanaian. There are references to the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), to Lord Lugard College (Lugard was the British founder of Nigeria), and to an oil boom. If Kangan represents Nigeria, the dissident province Abazon corresponds to Igbolan (Eastern Nigeria), the one province out of four that does not go along with the President's wishes, in a national referendum, much as Eastern Nigeria sought to separate from the other three regions of Nigeria in 1967. The people from Abazon have names like Okele, Mgbafo, and Ikem Osodi – good Igbo names. They speak Igbo as well: Ikem writes that the ancestry used to say Nneka, Igbo for "Mother is supreme".[153]

In addition, some elements of the novel offer noticeable resonances with details of Achebe's own biography: the name of Chris Oriko, one of the four main characters in the novel, is strongly reminiscent of Achebe's associate, the Igbo poet and publisher Christopher Okigbo, who died during the Biafran war.[154] Similarly, some of Ikem's declarations converge with Achebe's extra-textual interventions around the time of the novel's publication. For instance, the quotation of Walt Whitman used by Ikem to define his position as an intellectual: 'Do I contradict myself?/Very well then

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[151] Charles E. Nnolim, 'The Artist in Search for the Right Leadership: Achebe as a Social Critic', in *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. by Ernest Emenyonu and Iniobong I. Uko (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), p. 225.

[152] Nnolim, p. 233.

[153] Kortenaar, pp. 167-188 (p. 182).

[154] Achebe himself has acknowledged the presence and significance of these echoes, while insisting on his desire to create a story that would not be 'locked in any particular place and time' and would therefore provide 'a metaphor on a big scale, not just for one country but for a whole continent' (Wilkinson, pp. 141-154 (p. 148).

I contradict myself/(I am large, I contain multitudes)...' was used in a very similar manner by Achebe in his 1986 Nigerian National Merit Award Lecture.[155]

As a consequence, many discussions of the book have focused on the evaluation of Achebe's political 'prescriptions' for Nigeria and Africa more generally. The critic Olugesun Oladipo thus complains that *Anthills* advocates a 'reformist social vision' that is 'inadequate as a model for an African revolution'.[156] Yet a significant portion of these critics seem to have experienced a certain frustration in their search for the political message of *Anthills*. For David Maughan Brown, not only is there a strong discrepancy between *Anthills* and the 'populist' ideas expressed by Achebe in essays and interviews, but the novel itself is full of internal contradictions: 'contradictions and confusions can be discerned at all levels in *Anthills of the Savannah*, from the fictional devices used, through to the solutions being proposed'.[157] This diagnosis is shared by Olawale Awokisa, according to whom '*Anthills of the Savannah* fails to make a coherent statement'.[158] Awokisa's analysis relies mostly on the expectation that each character should embody a particular position and that Achebe should reveal his approval or disapproval of this position through a positive or negative depiction of the character. Awosika therefore complains about the ambiguity of Chris: 'At this point we want to fall back on the author. We suspect that his conception of this character is faulty. If Chris is a "good guy" why did he have so much to do with Sam? If he is a "bad guy" why, then is he oriented so much with the clean ones? Chris does not represent any coherent values in the story'.[159]

Paradoxically, these attempts to read *Anthills* as a political reflexion reveal the inevitable tension that arises in any attempt to interpret Achebe's text in a strictly 'non-literary' manner. Indeed, although Maughan Brown and Awokisa choose to reject and criticize these ambiguities, their readings bump up against the very complexities of meaning that 'literary' approaches would valorize. Conversely, the

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[155] Chinua Achebe, 'What Has Literature Got to Do with It?', in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), pp. 106-117 (p. 111).

[156] Oladipo 'The New Radicalism in *Anthills of the Savannah*', 22.

[157] Maughan Brown, pp. 3-22 (p. 13).

[158] Olawale Awosika, 'The Problem of Coherence in *Anthills of the Savannah*', in *Eagle on Iroko: Selected Papers from the Chinua Achebe International Symposium 1990*, ed. by Edith Ihekweazu (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1996), pp. 234-244 (p. 234).

[159] Awosika, pp. 234-244 (p. 238).

elements that seem to have motivated critics such as Maughan Brown and Awokisa to look for a directly political message in the novel have sometimes been perceived as heavy-handed and potentially detrimental to the aesthetic quality of the work. Thus, Elleke Boehmer notes that 'In creating a "populist inclusiveness", Achebe may to some extent be suspected of deliberate design. This impression is reinforced by the rather determined development of the novel's two main heroes [Chris and Ikem]',[160] while David Carroll argues:

> The larger question, addressed with characteristic urgency, is: why and how has the history of this fictitious African country become so embittered? Some answers begin to emerge through the main characters as their privileged world crumbles around them and they undergo a forced re-education. This is the least successful part of the novel. They have to learn too much too quickly and they can only do so through a series of revelations, conversions, startling insights, which frequently make these sophisticated characters appear both inconsistent and unrealistically naïve.[161]

In the light of these comments, it seems that the didactic and aesthetic dimensions of *Anthills* tend to impinge on each other, and to create conflicting expectations concerning the function of the novel. Rather than privilege either of these possibilities, my own approach will consist in exploring the complementariness between them and to question the alternative between political and aesthetic readings which has often polarized the interpretation of African literatures.

* *

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To make my argument, I will place my analysis of the text in relation to Susan Rubin Suleiman's 1983 study of the genre of the *roman à thèse* in *Authoritarian Fictions*, as I believe this will provide key insights for the interpretation of Achebe's novel. The comparison between the two texts is also interesting from a theoretical perspective, because Suleiman's ambition in *Authoritarian Fictions* was not only to foreground the existence of a literary genre, but also to question what constituted at

[160] Elleke Boehmer, 'Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*', in *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, ed. by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1991), pp. 102-112 (p. 102).

[161] Carroll, p. 184.

the time (and to a large extent still constitutes) the dominant conception of the 'literary'. By focusing on the *roman à thèse*, her project explicitly privileges texts which, because they go against the openness to interpretation and polysemy that is often regarded as the hallmark of 'literariness', have been marginalized as objects of critical attention.[162] At the same time, Suleiman's analysis, which offers a distinctly formalistic and structuralist reading of these novels, is clearly situated within the very critical methodologies that have led to the marginalization and devalorization of the texts she discusses.[163] Indeed, Suleiman's intention is not to reject these approaches, but to question the way in which a certain definition of 'literariness' has come to exclude the impulse to link the texts and the realities to which they apparently refer. Of particular interest for the general argument of my thesis is Suleiman's reworking of Roman Jakobson's distinction between the communicative and poetic functions of language. Suleiman moves away from the idea of a hierarchy between these two functions, according to which literature is characterized by the domination of the poetic function and can therefore be neatly opposed to the 'non-literary' text, which is dominated by the communicative function. Instead, her argument emphasizes the manner in which these two functions actually coexist, sometimes uneasily, within the categories of the 'literary' and the 'non-literary', thereby creating a porosity between them:

> But if we evoke Roman Jakobson's terminology, we must recall that according to Jakobson the hallmark of a "poetic" text (in the broad sense of a text characterized by "literariness") is that in it the communicative functions of language are subordinated to the poetic function – the latter not being limited to literature in verse, of course. [...] To say about a literary text or genre, then, that it is "as much" oriented toward communication as toward poetry seems to be

[162] As Suleiman underlines, this marginalization results from the desire to establish a strict separation between 'literary' and 'ordinary' language:

> Modern criticism has been tremendously wary of any literary work that "means to say something" (that has a "message"), and of any critic or reader who reads literature as an "attempt to say something" – who reads it for its "message." The Sartrian dream of transparent language (...) has been replaced, in contemporary avant-garde criticism, by Mallarmé's dream of language as a mirror of itself ("le langage se réfléchissant"). This substitution (where the pertinent opposition is not between prose and poetry, but between "literary" language and "ordinary" language, or between literature and communication) has had as one of its consequences the devalorization of a whole vast field of literature – a field that includes not only a genre as unabashedly didactic as the *roman à these*, but all the realist genres founded on the aesthetic (or as some of its attackers say, on the ideology) of verisimilar representation. Suleiman, p. 18.

[163] This aspect was emphasized by Diana Sorensen Goodrich in her review of Suleiman's study: 'Review: Roman À Thèse on Trial', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 18 (1985), 173-175.

> to ignore the principle of the hierarchy of functions, for either a text is oriented chiefly toward communication (in which case it is not "literary"), or it is "literary," but in that case the communicative function must be subordinated to the poetic one. And yet, every reader feels – even if that feeling is no more than intuitive – that in certain literary texts, the domination of the poetic function is "stronger," or perhaps more exclusive, than in others: a sonnet by Mallarmé seems more exclusively oriented toward the palpability of signs than, say, Hugo's poem about the two Napoleons, "Le Châtiment".[164]

I quote Suleiman at length here because of the role this paragraph ascribes to the 'feelings' experienced by the reader in motivating her redefinition of the relation between 'the poetic' and the 'communicative' functions. Indeed, as I noted in the Introduction and as will emerge more clearly in the following chapters and in the Conclusion, the notion of experience will be crucial to my own argument about the relation between aesthetics and politics. In this paragraph, Suleiman suggests that it is precisely because of the paradoxical and heterogeneous experiences that literary texts can elicit that we should regard the 'communicative' and 'poetic' functions of language as existing on a continuum. In this regard, the *roman à thèse* constitutes a privileged object of inquiry: 'the greatest interest of the *roman à thèse* lies in its hybrid character, generating tension between two opposing tendencies: the simplifying and schematizing tendency of the thesis, and the complicating and pluralizing tendency of novelistic writing broadly conceived'.[165]

This tension also plays a fundamental role in *Anthills*, and the novel shares a lot of characteristics with the *roman à these* as defined by Suleiman. However, my aim in this discussion is not to determine whether *Anthills of the Savannah* really belongs to the genre (this point is disputable: Suleiman argues that the *roman à thèse* is usually a realist novel, whereas Achebe's novel is characterized by a complex narrative structure and the presence of mythical elements) but rather to shed some light on how its rhetorical and structural characteristics both build up and disappoint the expectation that *Anthills* will supply a clear political message, or even a lesson. Suleiman considers that one of the most important traits of the genre is that '*romans à thèse* formulate, in an insistent, consistent, and unambiguous manner the thesis (or

[164] Suleiman, pp. 19-20.

[165] Suleiman, p. 201.

theses) they seek to illustrate'.[166] In other words, what characterizes a *roman à thèse* is a certain eagerness to tell readers what it means. According to Suleiman, one of the main devices through which this is achieved is 'the structure of apprenticeship'. This structure, which Suleiman derives from Lukàcs's analysis of the *Bildungsroman,* consists in the evolution of one or several characters from a state of ignorance and passivity to one of knowledge and action, whereby the character discovers the nature of his or her true self and attains a form of authenticity.[167] In a *roman à thèse,* this authenticity usually lies in the character's recognition of the validity of a specific doctrine.[168] There are also reversed forms of apprenticeships, or 'negative apprenticeships', in which the characters evolve toward a state of inauthenticity and unhappiness, but both types of apprenticeships have a similar exemplary function: the positive apprenticeship shows the behaviour that the reader should imitate, while the negative one is intended to be dissuasive.

The main narrative line of *Anthills of the Savannah* corresponds to exactly such a structure, and describes the positive apprenticeship of its three main characters, Chris, Ikem and Beatrice. Chris is perhaps the one who undergoes the most striking transformation. At the beginning, he is presented as a disenchanted young intellectual, who, having lost not only his political illusions but also his capacity for moral indignation, collaborates with the dictatorial regime of Sam, 'His Excellency'. His moral apathy appears right after the opening of the novel, when after a humiliating confrontation with Sam during a cabinet meeting, Chris explains: 'it meant nothing to me – no inconvenience whatever...' (2). Later, he comments cynically on the self-abasement of his colleagues: 'I find their actions not merely bearable now but actually interesting, even exciting' (2) and justifies public executions by saying that 'from all accounts, [people] enjoyed the spectacle' (36). Chris's apprehension of the world is dominated by irony and distance, and he describes his position as 'detached clinical disinterest' (2), or as that of someone who sees 'through a telescope' (4) – as Simon Gikandi writes, 'Chris claims the authority

[166] Suleiman, p. 10.

[167] Suleiman, pp. 64-65. However, Suleiman rejects Lukàcs's idea that all novels are variants of the *Bildungsroman*.

[168] Ibid., p. 67.

of the ironic gaze that can penetrate the masks of power'.[169] However, although he collaborates with the dictator, Chris does possess a number of positive traits and he is depicted as highly intelligent, a quality exemplified by a tirade on nations and dictators, which leaves his friend Ikem 'infuriated and impressed for though he [Ikem] may be a great writer yet when it comes to speaking off the cuff he is no match for Chris' (68). His apprenticeship is fostered by the murder of Ikem, which forces him to realize the monstrous nature of the regime he has been working with and to move from his dispassionate stance to opposition and clandestinity. His evolution culminates in his redemptive death, while saving a young student-nurse, Adamma, from being raped by a police sergeant. This evolution is highly dramatized as Chris is made to utter what is apparently one of the main theses of the novel in his last breath: just before dying, he pronounces a few words, which, we are told, 'sounded like The Last Grin' (200). The importance of this enigmatic phrase is amplified by the fact that its true meaning is only revealed at the very end of the novel, when the surviving characters finally manage to make sense of it. Emmanuel, a young intellectual who was travelling with Chris, renders it as 'the Last Grin', whereas Adamma says that she heard 'the last green' (213). The significance of this dialogue is reinforced by the fact that Adamma, who is consistently depicted as extremely shy, remains silent for most of the novel, thus making her intervention an exceptional event. At first, it seems obvious that Emmanuel's proposition must be right, since 'the last green' does not immediately make sense. But – after a carefully studied delay – Beatrice recognizes the right interpretation: it was really 'The last green', a reference to the nursery rhyme 'Ten Green Bottles'. To ensure that nothing is left in the vague, Beatrice states all the implications of this reference:

> Chris was only just beginning to understand the lesson of that bitter joke. The bottles are up there on the wall hanging by a hair's breadth, yet looking down pompously on the world. Chris was sending us a message to beware. This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented... (215)

In fact, the reader had already been prepared for that interpretation, since not long before his death, Chris had referred to the green bottles, using it to illustrate a similar point on the role of leadership: 'Who are we? The trinity who thought they owned

[169] Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, p. 141.

Kangan as BB once unkindly said? Three green bottles. One has accidentally fallen; one is tilting. Going, going, bang! Then we becomes I, becomes imperial We' (176).

This hesitation between the two interpretations of Chris's last words draws attention to the evolution of the character. If Chris's last words had been 'The Last Grin', this would have remained in line with his earlier ironic attitude. The 'grin' is reminiscent of Chris's duplicitous playacting at the beginning of the novel, especially when, at the end of the ministers' meeting, he laughs 'quite ostentatiously' in front of his colleagues (9). The replacement of 'The Last Grin' by 'the last green', or rather, the fusion of the two meanings through the misunderstanding (after all, Chris did smile and manage an ultimate joke while he was dying), summarizes Chris's transformation and his new understanding of what Beatrice aptly calls 'the lesson'. It is also significant that the meaning of the phrase could only be deciphered through a joint effort in which Adamma was included, along with Emmanuel and Beatrice, as this confirms the idea that intellectuals need to listen to the rest of the people (although it is nevertheless Beatrice, herself an intellectual, who has the last word on the issue). In his last breath, Chris has finally attained a state of authenticity, both in knowledge (the 'lesson') and action (the rescue of Adamma), as opposed to the detachment and passivity of his earlier attitude. But this enlightenment comes too late, and it is only through the heroic circumstances of Chris's death that a final redemption can be achieved.

The second main apprenticeship of the novel is that of Ikem Osodi. Ikem's initial point of view is more or less the opposite of Chris's. He is a talented poet, the editor of the *National Gazette*, and an open critic of the regime, against which he writes incendiary editorials. Contrary to Chris's ironic stance, his discourse is decidedly committed, with strong revolutionary undertones. He summarizes his own attitude with these words: 'Those who mismanage our affairs would silence our criticism by pretending they have facts not available to the rest of us. [...] Our best weapon against them is not to marshal facts, of which they are truly managers, but passion' (35). Just as Chris's intelligence was tainted by a measure of cynicism, Ikem's political courage is accompanied by smugness and a tendency to make snap judgements. He entertains little doubt about his own insights and seems quite confident that his writing is politically efficient. It is clear to him, for instance, that

the prohibition of public executions owes a lot to one of his editorials (39), while he concludes his own description of Sam with: 'I am sure I am right' (43). In fact, Ikem seems to be able to produce definitive opinions on virtually any subject, as his constant pronouncements suggest: 'A man should wake up in his own bed. A woman likewise' (34), 'They are their own worst enemy, women are' (34), 'The Emperor may be a fool but he is not a monster' (42), 'It does not seem to me that the English can do much harm to anybody today' (47). In addition to this arrogance, Ikem is characterized by an extremely condescending stance toward women, which Beatrice regards as 'the only chink in his revolutionary armour' (59). This misogyny is notably illustrated by Ikem's attitude towards Elewa, his illiterate girlfriend. Because he detests 'the very notion of waking up and finding [...] somebody naked and unappetizing', Ikem usually sends Elewa home in the middle of the night, even though this clearly upsets her. During their first argument on the topic, Elewa speaks in pidgin and Ikem replies to her, in formal English, 'your compliment to my stamina notwithstanding, the reason is really quite simple', which he describes as 'totally and deliberately over her head' (33). Ikem's unsympathetic attitude to women is also reflected in the provocative manner in which he describes his enjoyment of hearing his neighbour beat his 'beautiful wife': 'There is an extraordinary surrealistic quality about the whole thing that is almost satisfyingly cathartic' (32), and in his amusement at the fact that the only answer a neighbour received after trying to alert the police was: 'So Therefore?' (32).

However, this self-righteousness and sexism are both 'corrected' in the course of the novel, and just like Chris's, Ikem's transformation is carefully dramatized. Ikem explains his new opinions to Beatrice during his final visit to her home, which takes place during a 'huge and unseasonal tropical storm' (85) – a use of the pathetic fallacy that underlines the inner turmoil of the character. After telling Beatrice that he has 'come on a mission the like of which [he had] never undertaken before' (88), Ikem commences a speech which revolves around two main topics, women and the value of political reformism. Ikem starts with a long apology for his previous chauvinism and acknowledges that 'assigning to women the role of a fire-brigade after the house has caught fire and been virtually consumed' is not enough (88). His new position on the matter is that it belongs to women to decide for themselves

which role they intend to play in modern society: ‘I can’t tell you what the new role for Woman will be. I don’t know. I should never have presumed to know. *You* have to tell us’ (90). This new, humble attitude is also a departure from Ikem’s previous arrogance, and Ikem exposes his decision to renounce the certainties of revolutionary thought in favour of reformism and ideological complexity: ‘Reform may be a dirty word then but it begins to look more and more like the most promising route to success in the real world’ (91). To which he adds a few lines later: ‘In the vocabulary of certain radical theorists contradictions are given the status of some deadly disease to which their opponents alone can succumb. But contradictions are the very stuff of life’ (91). After the speech, Ikem and Beatrice kiss, a transgression which is yet another reflection of the magnitude of the event, and is underscored by Beatrice’s strong physical reaction: ‘Everything inside me was dissolving, my knees were giving way under me; I was trembling violently and I seemed to be struggling for air’ (92). At the end of the passage, as a validation of what has just been said, we read that the storm has died without the characters noticing. But again, this conversion comes too late to save Ikem, who will eventually be assassinated by the regime. His death, however, is preceded by a kind of apotheosis, during which Ikem exposes his new ideas in a lecture at the university. The delirious reactions of the audience and the positive appreciation of the lecture by the narrator who describes it as ‘so well crafted and so powerfully spoken’ (141) leave little doubt as to the validity of Ikem’s new-found credo: the character has eventually reached a state of authenticity.

Yet, in spite of this apparent readiness to offer theses and ideas, the interpretations *Anthills* puts on display are sometimes counteracted by other effects, which create uncertainty as to the overall meaning of the novel. This appears already in the third apprenticeship of the novel, that of Beatrice, whose personal and political growth is somewhat more complicated than that of Chris or Ikem. The character of Beatrice has often been perceived by critics as the sign of a complete revision of Achebe’s previous positions on the role of women. For instance, Rose Achonolu contends that ‘in this work, one could argue that Achebe’s women have definitely evolved in course of time, from the outsiders they tend to be in the traditionally set works, to

their present near-centre position as possible insiders'.[170] Similarly, even though he acknowledges the limits of Achebe's vision of women, Omar Sougou argues: 'By creating Beatrice as an outstanding female character, Achebe recasts the view of women apparent in his previous work'.[171] Another critic, David Ker enthusiastically claims that 'everything about her is meant to remove the prejudices men have held about women. [...] Beatrice is a confident woman who knows what she wants. She is indeed the new emancipated Nigerian woman, bright, intelligent, career-oriented, tough and as committed to worthy causes as her male counterparts'.[172] Yet such interpretations have been contested by other critics, according to whom *Anthills* maintains women in a subordinate position. For instance, while acknowledging the importance of Beatrice as Achebe's 'first sustained female subject', Simon Gikandi suggests that 'one is not quite certain that Achebe, in trying to design a new role for this character, has escaped the mythologies that surround the lives and experience of women (she is often defined by some quite stereotyped notions about women such as the power of intuition over thought, feelings over reason)'.[173] Ifi Amadiume goes further and argues that 'As for the author's commitment to feminism, we find that the story has already taken shape before the female characters are introduced. The females in fact come in as "subordinate" or in "service relationship" to the men'.[174]

Reading Beatrice as representative of the condition of women more generally seems all the more tempting as her own narration displays a strong concern for this issue. In fact, many of her reflexions have a strong feminist ring to them: 'I was determined from the very beginning to put my career first and, if need be, last. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like Women's Lib' (80-81). She is also the one who helps Ikem understand that his vision of women is

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[170] Rose Achonolu, 'Outsiders or Insiders?: Women in *Anthills of the Savannah*', in *Eagle on Iroko: Selected Papers from the Chinua Achebe International Symposium 1990*, ed. by Edith Ihekweazu (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1996), pp. 311-321 (p. 320).

[171] Sougou, pp. 35-54 (p. 52).

[172] Quoted in *The Politics of Memory*, ed. by Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi A. An-Na'im (New York: Zed, 2000), p. 61.

[173] Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, pp. 145-146.

[174] Amadiume, 147-157 (p. 148).

inadequate, and his final realization that women should play a more prominent role in society has clearly been inspired by her own assertion that:

> giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in the Sembene film who pick up the spears abandoned by their defeated menfolk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late! (84)

But if at the beginning of the novel Beatrice is presented as an educated, intelligent woman, she is also, like Chris and Ikem, a flawed character. Her main weaknesses are individualism and an ignorance of her own culture. She thus describes herself as somewhat 'suspicious' and declares that she 'never embarked on anything beyond [her] own puny powers' (80). Moreover, she displays a certain contempt for less enlightened women, like her maid Agatha, a narrow-minded, born-again Christian, whose relation with Beatrice is characterized by continuous tensions and petty arguments. Most of these flaws are corrected at the end of the novel, when after having lost Ikem and Chris, Beatrice opens up to other people and invites Ikem's pregnant girlfriend, Elewa, to come and live with her. Inspired by the memory of Ikem, she also acquires a new-found sympathy for Agatha:

> [Ikem's] last visit at her flat had risen with his death to dominate her consciousness of him and driven earlier and even later memories firmly into the background. [...]
>
> this consciousness was now, at the ebb-tide of her anger impinging on despised Agatha, who had wilfully placed herself until now beyond the reach of Beatrice's sympathy by her dry-as-dust, sanctimonious, born-again ways; yes, impinging on her of all people and projecting on to the screen of the mind a new image of her; and in the background the narrator's voice coming through and declaring: *It is now up to you women to tell us what has to be done. And Agatha is surely one of you*'. (169)

The dramatic eruption of this mental 'narrator', combined with the description of Elewa who, a few lines earlier, is said to be radiating a 'strong, spiritual light', a 'new luminosity' and a 'touch, distinct, almost godlike', gives this passage the appearance of a mystical revelation (169). The validity of Beatrice's new attitude is further confirmed at the end of the section, when she apologizes for rebuking Agatha

and places her hand on the maid's shoulder, to which Agatha replies with 'a sunrise of smiles' (170).

Such quasi-divine interventions occur several times in relation to Beatrice, often to correct her own view of herself. The most striking instance can be found in Chapter 8, when a third-person narrator offers a number of clarifications and corrections following Beatrice's narration in Chapter 7. This narrative voice differs from the third-person narrator we can find in other chapters of the novel (namely Chapters 2, 3 and all the chapters following chapter 8), as it is the only one to make its own intervention visible and to designate itself by the pronoun 'we': 'that we are surrounded by deep mysteries' (93); 'she was born as we have seen into a world apart' (96); 'Barely, we say though' (96). This use of 'we' is not only a classic author's plural, which confers particular authority to what is being said, but also appears to represent the collective voice of tradition. This narrative voice thus draws a connection between Beatrice and the myth of Idemili, a female deity whose function is to create a balance with the male principle of 'Power': 'to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty' (93). However, according to the narrator, Beatrice is unaware of her own connection to Idemili, and only 'carr[ies] a vague sense more acute at certain critical moments than others of being two different people' (96). This ignorance is explained by Beatrice's education in 'schools which made much about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with who they had evolved' (96). In fact, not only did this make her ignorant of the 'traditions and legends of her people', but Beatrice, according to the narrator, 'came to barely knowing who she was' (96). The paragraph then ends with this enigmatic sentence: 'But knowing or not knowing does not save us from being known and even being recruited and put to work' (96), which suggest that in spite of her ignorance of her own role, the character of Beatrice will be 'put to work' to illustrate something of which she is unaware.

Indeed, all through the novel, Beatrice unwittingly plays the role defined for her in chapter 8 and acts as a kind of prophetess, announcing the tragic fate that awaits Chris and Ikem. She issues several explicit warnings, such as:

> I see trouble building up for us. It will get to Ikem first. No joking, Chris. He will be the precursor to make straight the way. But after him it will be you. We are all in it, Ikem, you, me and even Him. The thing is no longer a joke. (105)

This prophetic role, which is reinforced in the quotation above by the implicit reference to St John the Baptist, 'the precursor' of Jesus Christ, is acknowledged in Beatrice's conversations with the other characters. For instance, during an argument, Chris accuses her of '[s]creaming at [him] like some Cherubim and Seraphim prophetess of something' (103), and later comes to perceive her love-making as a powerful rite: 'Clearly this was her grove and these her own peculiar rites over which she held absolute power. Priestess or goddess herself? No matter' (104). To this, Beatrice herself replies: 'I do sometimes feel like Chielo in the novel, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves' (105).[175] Beatrice also foresees the grim unfolding of the story in less explicit ways. For instance, the threat she perceives in the voice of an officer, Major Ossai, at the end of a presidential party, prefigures the Major's decisive role in Ikem's assassination: 'The soft voice conveying the news of the car waiting below had done it. Her sense of danger had been stabbed into hypersensitivity by the menace of that voice – quiet as before but flashing ever so briefly with that glint of metal' (97). Later, when detecting a strange expression on Ikem's face, she senses the tragedy that awaits him: 'Was it the look of a prospective martyr who has successfully trained his soul's gaze to look past the blurred impending ordeal to the sharply focused crown of glory far beyond' (134). Finally, during her last encounter with Chris, she has 'a powerful premonition that Chris and she had tonight come to a crossroad' (181), while in the last chapter, the events of the last weeks are described as 'the weeks of ill omen presaging the bloody events of November' (202).

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[175] 'Chielo in the novel' constitutes an intertextual reference to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is probably significant that the novel which is referred to is Achebe's first, the one that established his position as a prominent African writer. It is only mentioned here as 'the novel', which emphasizes both its singularity and its influential character. Just as *Anthills of the Savannah* arrived in a world full of expectations for the new novel 'by the author of *Things Fall Apart*', the characters of *Anthills of the Savannah* live in a world in which *Things Fall Apart* has achieved the status of common reference. But this inclusion of *Things Fall Apart* also signals the gap between Achebe's first novel and *Anthills*: Chielo does not appear in the novel, she is not part of its universe but only present in the form of a literary reference. The world of *Things Fall Apart* is not situated in the past of *Anthills of the Savannah* but reverberates in it as a fiction, through which Beatrice is able to sense her own unconscious role as a 'priestess'.

However, the fact that this role as a prophetess remains mostly unconscious, and that Beatrice is somehow 'known', 'recruited' and 'put to work' in ways she does not entirely understand creates a contradiction with one of the main lessons of Ikem's apprenticeship: that women should decide for themselves which role they ought to play. The authoritative intervention of the narrator in Chapter 8 may even appear as an ironic undermining of this statement, as Beatrice is compared to 'the village priestess who will prophesy when her divinity rides her, abandoning if need be her soup-pot on the fire, but returning again when the god departs to the domesticity of kitchen or the bargaining market-stool behind her little display of peppers and dry fish and green vegetables' (96). This role is obviously quite different from the career-oriented aspirations she originally expressed, and Beatrice's ignorance about her true self makes her ill-equipped to articulate her own role as Ikem suggested. The contradictions that emerge if one attempts to interpret Beatrice's actions and attitudes as a 'message' concerning women's condition and social role has been acknowledged by Amadiume who notes that 'Even with Beatrice, we find that there are inconsistencies in the development of her supposed strong and independent character in lines such as when Chris says that she asks "inconvenient questions like a precocious child"'.[176] Amadiume also points out that although Ikem's new feminist credo states that women should not be confined to 'the role of the fire-brigade after the house has caught fire', 'This is exactly what Achebe has had women to do in this novel – pick up the pieces after the three green bottles get shattered'.[177]

* *

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These inconsistencies in the didactic structure of the novel are reinforced when one examines more closely one of the main themes of the text, namely the 'power' of writers and story-tellers. In addition to the structure of apprenticeship, another central characteristic of the *roman à thèse* analysed by Suleiman is redundancy. Drawing on Barthes's previous use of this notion, Suleiman argues that *romans à thèse* are

[176] Amadiume, 147-157 (p. 150).

[177] Ibid., p. 151.

inhabited by an 'obsessive fear to communicate meaning'.[178] This closure of interpretation is achieved through the accumulation of clues, signs, symbols, hints or authorial interventions, aimed at establishing the 'true' meaning of the text and at dissuading the reader from seeking any other interpretation than the one it provides. This corresponds well to the strategies used in *Anthills*, where theses are not only repeated, but also communicated through different devices, such as statements, exemplary narratives, symbols, or connotations. Thus, Ikem's belief in the significance of the story is repeated a number of times, through different means. It is first explicitly stated when Ikem vehemently opposes the idea that his editorials 'achieve nothing', and it is implicitly confirmed later, when it is recalled that Ikem's editorials saved a friend of his, Mad Medico, from deportation. This belief in the power of words is later repeated by the old emissary from Abazon, whose positive depiction, combined with the deferential reaction of the audience, grants the idea a certain authority. Furthermore, the old man's argument about the capacity of the story to outlive the warrior is again repeated in the last chapter of the novel, when Emmanuel manages to convince Beatrice that ideas can actually survive people, by means of the written word: 'It wasn't Ikem the man who changed me. I hardly knew him. It was his ideas set down on paper' (207).

However, this openly stated message concerning the power and importance of the writer is destabilized by the very episode that is supposed to illustrate it: Ikem's lecture at the university. The lecture is presented to us as a successful, highly influential speech, and its importance is dramatized through a lengthy description of the surrounding context. First, we are told that an immense crowd had come to listen to Ikem: 'Every seat in the two-thousand-capacity Main Auditorium was taken and a large overspill sat or stood on gangways or peeped in through doors and windows from the two side-corridors running the length of the hall' (140). Furthermore, the reader's expectations are heightened by the narration of the different contretemps that arise and delay the speech: the absence of a functioning microphone, 'last-minute consultations by the organizers', and introductions. Then, Ikem himself, before actually starting the lecture, takes some time to say that his speech is a meditation rather than a lecture and to mention the old representative from Abazon as

[178] Suleiman, p. 180.

his source of inspiration. At this point, the reader is likely to feel the same impatience as the students in the auditorium. But ironically, contrary to the students who actually get to hear the speech, the reader's expectations remain unfulfilled, as the narrator does not quote a single word from the lecture. All we are told is:

> It was a brief presentation, twenty to twenty-five minutes long, that was all; but it was so well crafted and so powerfully spoken it took on the nature and scope of an epic prose-poem. It was serious but not solemn; sometimes witty without falling into the familiarity of banter. (142)

The description is positive but it is also deliberately vague, as the series of restrictions make it practically impossible to imagine the speech: 'brief' but with 'the scope of an epic prose-poem'; 'serious but not solemn'; 'witty without falling into the familiarity of banter'. In fact, this description could be said to conceal much more than it reveals.

This disappearance of Ikem's speech is all the more striking as its narrative and ideological function in the novel seems crucial. Ikem's lecture is the result of the intellectual and political maturation he has undergone throughout the novel, and it is supposed to offer the synthesis of his declarations to Beatrice, of the things he has learnt from the old Abazonian, and of his realization that intellectuals need to restore their links with the people (130-131). Ikem seems to have at last discovered what his new role as an intellectual living in the postcolonial period might be, and before the lecture begins, we are told that he 'smiled inwardly at the impending *coup d'état* he would stage against this audience and its stereotype notion of struggle, as indeed of everything else' (141), which suggests both the magnitude of Ikem's ambition and, in line with the metaphor of the '*coup d'état*', the revolutionary character of his ideas. This impact is later confirmed in the last chapter, when Emmanuel declares: 'The ideas in one lecture by Ikem changed my entire life from a parrot to a man' (207). The importance and the intelligence of Ikem's speech are also conveyed through the enraptured reaction of the students, who are 'silently entranced' (142) and frenetically call for more: 'Its sudden end was like a blow and it jolted them into shouts of protest. Calls of *Fire! Fire! More! More!* And even *Opposed!* Soon turned into a rhythmic chant when Ikem sat down' (142). Incidentally, if we can conjecture that the students ask for 'more' speech and 'oppose' Ikem's decision to stop

abruptly, the shouts of '*Fire!*' are somewhat more ambiguous. Although 'Fire!' may be used to convey the students' state of excitement, the context suggests that it could also be a reference to 'shouting fire in a crowded theatre', a phrase commonly used in the United States to refer to forms of expression that are deemed uselessly dangerous and therefore not protected by freedom of speech. By shouting 'Fire!' in the crowded lecture theatre, the students may be signifying that Ikem's speech has inspired them to transgress absolutely all the limits placed on their own freedom of speech, regardless of the potential risks. This would confirm Ikem's solemn warning just before his lecture: 'storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit' (141). In any case, the equivocal nature of the students' exclamations also provides a further example of the way ambiguities in meaning keep disrupting the didacticism of the novel.

Thus, at a first level, the ellipsis of Ikem's speech could work as an extreme case of interpretative closure. The lecture is meant to repeat and synthesize some of the main ideas already expressed in the novel: we know about the genesis of Ikem's lecture, and we know what its main ideological orientations are. By forbidding the reader to actually read his declarations, *Anthills* is ensuring that the narrator's assessment of the lecture will not be challenged by any 'incorrect' reading. But this vanishing of Ikem's discourse is also highly equivocal and could be read as a complex *mise en abyme* of the double-edged nature of *Anthills of the Savannah*: a multiplicity of devices are used to create the promise of a message, which 'exists' only fictionally. In the fictional world represented by the novel, Ikem's lecture has been told, and the right words have been found to make sense of the postcolonial situation. But this ideological resolution only exists in the novel's fictional universe, whereas for the readers of *Anthills,* Ikem's lecture remains a gap and an absence: ironically, the very element which is supposed to illustrate the power of the story-teller turns out to be a vanishing of the writer's discourse.

Comparably, the resolution that emerges in the last chapter is a purely fictional and metaphorical one. In this chapter, a new community is gathered in Beatrice's house for the naming ceremony of Ikem and Elewa's newborn child. This enlarged community offers a stark contrast with the little intellectual 'caucus' initially formed

by the main characters, and a variety of social sectors are represented: Beatrice's maid (Agatha), a market woman and her husband (Elewa's mother and uncle), a taxi-driver (Braimoh), the president of the Student Union (Emmanuel), a young officer (Captain Abdul Medani), as well as the student-nurse who was saved by Chris (Adamma). The idea that this scene symbolizes social renewal and inclusiveness is further confirmed by the fact that Beatrice goes against tradition and gives a name to the baby instead of letting a man do it, thus foreshadowing a new social role for women. The child, who may be read as a symbol for the future of the country, is named Amaechina, 'May-the-path-never-close', a phrase that is described as a Kangan version of 'hope that springs eternal' (206). This hopefulness is echoed by the numerous prayers Elewa's uncle pronounces, such as 'May she have life', 'What happened to her father, may it not happen again', or 'May this child be the daughter of all of us' (210). However, as several critics have underlined, this apparent solution is only a fictional one, and it is hard to see this chapter as a 'blueprint' for the future of Nigeria. Simon Gikandi writes for instance that 'The naming of Elewa's new baby is a narrative (imaginary) resolution to the paradoxes and problems of an "alienated history"',[179] while Elleke Boehmer has suggested that '*Anthills*, the African story as novel, carries its own vision of the future in appropriately figural terms. Achebe's "transposition" is in a number of ways, quite clearly, an avoidance technique, literally, a displacement of the problem'.[180]

In fact, the novel itself stages the distance between this symbolic solution and political realities: the community gathered into Beatrice's house has somehow cut itself off from the wider historical context in which another military coup has taken place and another leader has eliminated Sam. This new regime does not raise much hope, as it is using torture and murder exactly as the old one (203). Thus, while the group within Beatrice's house is calling for the advent of a better future, outside, history is repeating itself. This has led Olawale Awosika to complain that *Anthills* offers only a "baseless promise of salvation" instead of a proper political solution. [181] But it is perhaps only by accepting this limit that the study of fiction can transcend,

[179] Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, p. 148.

[180] Boehmer, pp. 102-112 (p. 106).

[181] Awosika, pp. 234-244 (p. 234).

through imagination, the conceptual and political impasses of the postcolonial context. This takes us back to the alternative I discussed earlier, between an approach to fiction motivated by its social and political relevance, or an interpretation of it as an autonomous aesthetic object whose value lies in its literary destabilization of "ordinary" communication. Rather than treat these two possibilities as mutually exclusive, the previous pages have drawn on this tension to propel the interpretation of the novel. A more realistic approach to the political concerns of postcolonial studies probably means that critics must accept that literature can only produce a "displaced" answer to political questions. But contrary to what prevalent notions of "literariness" would suggest, this does not imply that the desire to find political insights into the text is misguided. The impulse towards political realities and concrete solutions, which is simultaneously invited and frustrated by *Anthills*, is crucial to the reading experience, and in fact, it is only in relation to this impulse that the more "literary" ambiguities of fiction can appear.

To conclude, I would like to go back to one of Ikem's provocations. At the beginning of the novel, in response to Chris's claim that his editorials achieve nothing, Ikem retorts: "But supposing my crusading editorials were indeed futile would I not be obliged to keep on writing them?" (35). Although its primary function is to illustrate once more Ikem's boldness, there might be a more serious point to be teased out of this line: with this paradox, Ikem dismisses the alternative between the notion of a radical autonomy of literature, which Achebe has so often criticized, and the idea that the value of fiction lies in its ability to effect political change. In fact, Ikem seems to ground the writer's social "obligation" not in the direct political effects of his or her texts but precisely in their distance from the political. Ikem goes on to lament, jokingly, that Chris cannot understand this "logic" anymore, but it is possible that this relation can only be expressed and understood in the form of a paradox. At least, this is what is suggested by Achebe's novel, whose response to the corruption of anticolonial nationalist ideals by new oppressive regimes took the form of a paradoxical project: a *roman à thèse* that refuses to provide its readers with a clear and definite message.

3

The Truth about Amin

One of the most successful fictions produced about African dictatorship in recent years is Kevin MacDonald's film *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), a loose adaptation of Giles Foden's popular novel of the same title about Ugandan dictator Idi Amin Dada.[182] The film is a psychological thriller that depicts the tribulations of a fictional Scottish doctor, Nicholas Garrigan (played by James McAvoy), who becomes Amin's personal physician and adviser. The plot focuses on the relationship between the two men, blending fiction and historical reconstitution in intriguing ways, in order to perform a gradual disclosure of the dictator's deranged personality. With a worldwide gross revenue of more than $48 million (for a production budget of $6 million), the film was a commercial success, and accumulated over 20 major distinctions and award nominations.[183] For his interpretation of Amin, Forest Whitaker was named best actor at the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, the Screen Actors' Guild and the BAFTAs, to mention but a few, while the film won the 2007 BAFTA awards for Best British Film and for Best Adapted Screenplay.

The success of *The Last King of Scotland* highlights a crucial aspect of representations of African dictatorships, which has not yet appeared in previous chapters: their potential appeal as products of popular culture and mass entertainment. This raises new issues in our reflexion on aesthetics and politics, not only because it introduces a new medium, but also because it implies differences in terms of reception and impact. For instance, it might be argued that the popularity of

[182] Giles Foden, *The Last King of Scotland* (London: Faber, 1998)

[183] Figures from 'Box Office Mojo: The Last King of Scotland' <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=lastkingofscotland.htm> [accessed 24 September 2010].

The Last King of Scotland brings a new rationale for privileging a directly political or ethical examination, since it is more likely to have had an influence on the general public. Furthermore, whereas both Achebe's and Lopes's novels were situated in fictional countries, the *Last King of Scotland* takes as its subject a real historical character, which makes the question of the relation between the film and historical realities all the more pressing. However, this chapter will show that even if we decide to focus on political or ethical issues, these are inevitably perceived and filtered through the prism of aesthetics and genre. My discussion will also shed light on an issue which has not been addressed explicitly in the previous chapters, namely the relation between the kind of experiences I have been describing and the notion of aesthetic value. Both Achebe and Lopes are commonly regarded as great African writers, and it may have seemed that my own exploration has so far relied on an implicit, and perhaps narrow, conception of literary value. Although this chapter will show that perceptions of aesthetic value are indeed central to the way we experience filmic or literary texts, it also suggests that the act of judgement implied in these perceptions is only one aspect of the complex ways we relate to these works.

To pursue this argument, I will place *The Last King of Scotland* in relation to two other filmic representations of Amin's rule. The first is a work of nonfiction: the 1974 documentary *Général Idi Amin Dada: autoportrait* by Franco-Swiss director Barbet Schroeder, which was made while Amin was still in power. Amin agreed to cooperate fully with the film, which he saw as an opportunity for self-promotion. In reality, in front of Schroeder's camera, the dictator's attempts to manipulate the audience backfired, in a comic exposition of his incompetence and delusions. The second film is a British-Kenyan coproduction released in 1981 and entitled *Amin: The Rise and Fall* (also known as *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*).[184] Contrary to Schroeder's respected documentary, which was claimed as a source of inspiration by Kevin McDonald, this film by Kenyan director Sharad Patel has been virtually absent from discussions of *The Last King of Scotland*. Indeed, with its basic cinematography, poor acting, repetitive screenplay, and immoderate taste for bloody

[184] I will leave aside the two American TV films about the Entebbe hostage crisis *Raid on Entebbe*, dir. by Irvin Kershner (NBC, 1976) and *Victory at Entebbe*, dir. by Marvin J. Chomsky (ABC, 1976), as well as the 1977 Israeli film about the same events, *Operation Thunderbolt*. Although Amin is featured in these films, this chapter will concentrate on films in which he is the main focus.

violence, *Amin: The Rise and Fall* is commonly regarded as belonging to the realm of 'exploitation cinema' – a term I will discuss later on. The events of Amin's reign seem to have been a pretext for an accumulation of violence, and as one appreciative reviewer comments on a fan site: 'never does [sic] more than a few minutes seem to pass by without the viewer being treated to a scene of death by firing squad or of someone being stabbed, shot, roasted alive, shoved over a cliff, fed to the crocodiles or, if they're fortunate, escaping with just a brutal drubbing at the hand of Amin's hired goons'.[185]

At first sight, the critical respectability of the three films seems to coincide with their degree of historical credibility: Schroeder's film has been received as a reliable document and is considered a classic documentary, now distributed in the Criterion DVD collection, whereas the outrageous *Amin: The Rise and Fall* is regarded as an 'exploitation flick' and is no longer discussed outside a few fan websites and internet forums. *The Last King of Scotland* stands somewhere in-between, and is mostly considered a 'middlebrow' entertainment, as suggested by its success in mainstream award competitions and the absence of reviews in publications such as *Screen* or *Les Cahiers du cinéma*. This relation between the perceived truthfulness of a film and its respectability was pointed out in a review of *The Last King of Scotland* by the French newspaper *Libération*: 'Jusqu'ici les satrapes tropicaux n'ont guère inspiré de fictions au cinéma. Trop casse-gueule, peut-être, pour les réalisateurs "blancs", surtout s'ils sont originaires de l'ancienne puissance coloniale. Du coup, les potentats africains ont plutôt été abonnés aux documentaires'.[186] The implication is that because a documentary is supposed to be more historically accurate, it is ethically preferable to a work of fiction. This hierarchy and the assumptions on which it relies are what the following discussion will question.

Before I examine these three films, it will be useful to consider more closely the specific issues raised by Amin as a topic for filmic representations. Amin, who ruled over Uganda from 1971 to 1979, is perhaps the best example of African dictators'

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[185] Jack, 'The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin', *Jack's Movie Page* <http://jacksmoviepage.piczo.com/theriseandfallofidiamin?cr=5&linkvar=000044> [accessed 26 October 2010].

[186] Thomas Hofnung, 'Amin Dada, l'Ougandingue', *Libération* (Paris, 14 February 2007) <http://next.liberation.fr/cinema/010193971-amin-dada-l-ougandingue> [accessed 21 January 2011].

marketability. Already in the early 1970s, Alan Coren published a satirical column in *Punch* entitled 'Bulletins from Idi Amin', in which he adopted Amin's point of view to comment on international affairs. Amin also featured in *Mad Magazine*, as well as several movies, including two American TV films about the 1976 Entebbe hostage crisis: *Victory at Entebbe* (1976) with Elizabeth Taylor, Burt Lancaster, and Anthony Hopkins, as well as *Raid on Entebbe* (1977), with Charles Bronson. In addition, Amin has been the subject of many books. As early as 1977, *Time* argued that 'Big Daddy has already inspired what amounts to a budding literary subgenre', including fictional thrillers, plays, and a series of nonfictional studies.[187] Giles Foden's best-selling novel and Kevin MacDonald's film are thus only the latest manifestations of this ongoing fascination. This popularity was partly the result of Amin's own efforts to seek publicity, notably through an infamous succession of telegrams, in which, among other provocations, he wished Nixon a 'speedy recovery from Watergate' and explained to Kurt Waldheim that 'Hitler and all German people knew that Israelis are not people who are working in the interest of the world and that is why they burned the Israelis alive with gas in the soil of Germany'. These provocations, combined with the horrific violence of Amin's regime and the extravagant rumours about his supposed cannibalism, made him a sensational topic for Western media.

This abundance of 'entertaining' representations of Amin's reign appears even more striking when compared to the dearth of serious historical studies on the topic.[188] The source most often quoted in discussions of Amin is *State of Blood*, the testimony of his former Health Minister, Henry Kyemba. Published in 1977 while Kyemba was in exile in Great Britain, *State of Blood* was marketed as 'the inside story of Idi Amin's reign of fear' and described Amin as 'the Hitler of our time'.[189] The sensationalistic

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[187] 'Big Daddy in Books', *Time* (New York, 19 September 1977) <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915481-1,00.html> [accessed 22 January 2011].

[188] A notable exception is Mahmood Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational, 1983). Mamdani starts with a condemnation of the commercial exploitation of Amin's crimes: 'Why write another book on the Amin regime? The bookstalls are already full of books that thrive on the sensational, detailing the dictator's exploits in violence and sex. Like mindless computers, the authors of such books add up the number of deaths, tortures, assaults, robberies, wives, concubines and rapes indiscriminately, because they have market-value. Even a people's suffering is subject matter for the profit sharks'. (1) Mamdani refuses to focus on Amin's deeds and favours instead a Marxist approach emphasizing the impersonal forces of history.

[189] Henry Kyemba, *State of Blood: The Inside Story of Idi Amin* (London: Corgi, 1977). Such comparisons between Amin and Hitler were very common, as illustrated by the title of another

character of the 'fully illustrated' book is obvious enough, as suggested by the checklist of atrocities detailed on the back cover, which are advertised as so many treats for the reader (see illustration below). However, Kyemba's account was mostly received as historically reliable, especially in the United Kingdom. An editorialist at *The Times* commented: 'President Amin's rule of terror has now been finally documented by an unimpeachable eye-witness and his regime becomes as much a matter for world condemnation – and even more sanctions – as that of Rhodesia or South Africa'.[190] Similarly, *The Guardian* wrote a piece which reiterated Kyemba's accusations, arguing again for the authenticity of his testimony: 'As Minister of Health Mr Kyemba was uniquely placed to pin down the truth of what happened to Archbishop Luwum and Mrs Bloch'.[191] Significantly, the testimony has not yet been discredited and is still used in contemporary discussions of Ugandan history. In 2005, Martin Meredith's acclaimed and bestselling book on the history of Africa since independence, *The State of Africa*, still relied heavily on Kyemba's account as its main source about Amin's rule.[192] In 2007, Kyemba was also interviewed by some Western and African media to give his opinion on the accuracy of *The Last King of Scotland* – which he described as 'not a bad attempt at history' in *The New York Times*,[193] although he criticized it in Kampala's *New Vision*:

> Being a historian by profession, I find the film quite shallow. Since Ugandans are not very good at writing history, someone who does it for them should do it very well. My book would have given a better story. I do not mean it had it all. *State of Blood* was recorded at the

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testimony published the same year by Thomas and Margaret Melady, *Idi Amin Dada: Hitler in Africa* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977).

[190] 'The Unwelcome Guest Exposed', *The Times* (London, 6 June 1977), section editorial, p. 9. This positive reception may have been partly influenced by the fact that, as this editorial mentions, the publication of the book played in favour of the British government, which sought to avoid a direct confrontation with Amin at the upcoming Commonwealth Summit.

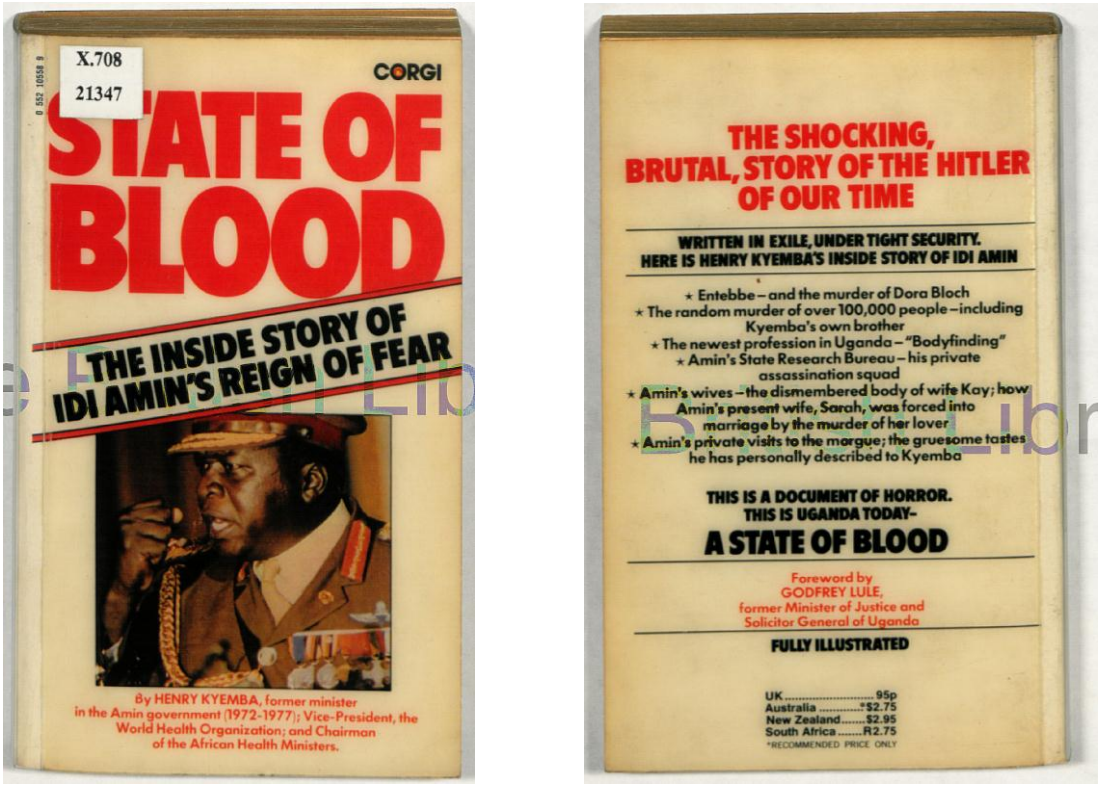
[191] Patrick Keatley, 'Amin's Police "killed 180,000"', *The Guardian* (London, 14 November 1977), p. 6. Ugandan Archbishop Janani Luwum was assassinated, perhaps by Amin himself, and Dora Bloch, an elderly woman who was the one Israeli hostage to have been left behind after the Israeli raid on Entebbe, was murdered as an act of revenge.

[192] Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (London: Free, 2005), pp. 234-238.

[193] Jeffrey Gettleman, 'A Film Star in Kampala, Conjuring Amin's Ghost', *The New York Times*, 18 February 2007, section International / Africa <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/world/africa/18uganda.html> [accessed 24 September 2010].

> actual time the events were taking place and it is not fiction. But at least, a lot of stories were taken from my book.[194]

That Henry Kyemba's lurid version of history should remain the main reference in current discussions of Amin says something about the limited knowledge available in the general public, as well as about the 'commodification' of Ugandan history which seems to have taken place. The sensationalism of the publication does not necessarily imply that it is inaccurate, but it seems quite clear that other concerns, such as commercial success and entertainment value, shaped the way it was written and published. In this respect, Kyemba's ambivalent appraisal of *The Last King of Scotland* is quite revealing: it is not clear whether 'My book would have given a better story' means that it would have provided a more factual basis or that it would have been superior from a narrative and dramatic point of view.



Front and back covers of the British edition of Henry Kyemba's *State of Blood* (1977)

[194] Quoted in Elizabeth Namazzi and others, 'Memories of Idi Amin Dada', *The New Vision* (Kampala, 24 February 2007) <http://allafrica.com/stories/200702260680.html> [accessed 22 January 2011].

This imbalance in representations of Amin points to a tension between the ethical and the aesthetic. Amin's reign, like that of many dictators, provides an appealing story with a powerful, larger-than-life character, strong comic potential and horror, that many journalists, filmmakers or novelists may want to use. However, the exploitation of this topic as a source of aesthetic enjoyment may well be considered ethically questionable. These issues were unmistakably a part of the reception of *The Last King of Scotland*. In *The New York Times*, for instance, Manohla Dargis described the film as 'a period fiction with a high-gloss historical finish' but concluded that 'the misery of other people makes for unsettling entertainment'.[195] In this context, one might be tempted to argue that representations of Idi Amin should not be judged only on their aesthetic merit or entertainment value, but that they raise a number of concerns, in which, for instance, historical truth may legitimately appear central. First of all, the relative ignorance of the general public concerning Amin certainly increases the responsibilities of a film like *The Last King of Scotland*, since a large part of its (mostly Western) audience will not have the necessary knowledge to appraise the historical representation of the film. This ethical pressure toward historical truthfulness is further heightened by the very atrocity of Amin's crimes: his regime is said to have been responsible for the death of over 300,000 people. In addition, focusing on Amin could easily appear (as the *Libération* review of *The Last King of Scotland* suggested) as an unscrupulous attempt to capitalize on the West's fascination with a negative African character, who has come to embody not only the failures of independent regimes on the continent, but also many of the racist clichés about Africa. As we will see, the filmmakers sought to avoid such problems by claiming the film played a pedagogical role, giving audiences access to historical truths. This is also how a number of commentators received it. However, this chapter will argue that even when critics apparently give priority to this ethical concern with truth, the role of historical truth itself actually plays a limited role in the way the film comes to be perceived. The paradox, as we shall see, is that while such concerns seem to be prompted by the fear of 'aestheticizing' Amin's regime, perceptions of truth in filmic representations are largely dependent on aesthetics.

[195] Manohla Dargis, 'An Innocent Abroad, Seduced by a Madman', *New York Times* (New York, 27 September 2006) <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/09/27/movies/27king.html> [accessed 26 October 2010].

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As a white director seeking to expose the insanity of an African dictator, in a documentary partly financed by the right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro*, Barbet Schroeder was taking great risks of being accused of racism. As a matter of fact, a few reviewers did make this accusation: in *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, Serge Daney suggested that 'le film, tel qu'il est fait, ne peut fonctionner (être vu, lu, aimé) *que* s'il réactive le racisme latent de son public'.[196] But these reactions remained in the minority. For the most part, *Général Idi Amin Dada: Autoportrait* enjoyed an enthusiastic reception, with quasi-unanimous praise flowing from sources as diverse as *Le Figaro* and the communist *L'Humanité*. This success seems to have had a lot to do with Schroeder's deft use of the rhetoric of documentary objectivity, which apparently convinced the majority of critics that his portrayal was simply a truthful representation of Amin. This is already suggested by the subtitle 'autoportrait', which attributes authorship to Amin himself. Schroeder indeed contended: 'je n'ai jamais influencé le général, le film est un autoportrait, coïmprovisé avec nous et en totale indépendance financière'.[197] Thus, *L'Aurore* described the film as 'effrayant par son objectivité', and in *Le Quotidien de Paris*, Henry Chapier argued:

> Lorsqu'on se trouve en présence d'un tel phénomène de la nature, aucun besoin de le mettre en scène : il faut, au contraire, lui laisser la direction des opérations, prendre la mesure de son narcissisme délirant, et le filmer tel qu'en lui-même, il se voit forger [sic] par sa propre légende.
>
> Barbet Schroeder ne saurait donc être accusé d'avoir abordé son sujet avec un quelconque parti pris : son regard sur l'Ouganda, et le portrait qu'il nous donne du président, c'est à travers les jeux du général Amin qu'on le voit ; s'il manque par exemple – dans ce

[196] Serge Daney, 'Obscurantisme (Idi Amin Dada)', *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, 1974, pp. 39-40 (p. 39). For similar critiques of the film as racist and manipulative, see Ph. D., 'A propos de "Général Idi Amin Dada". Un certain mépris pour les Africains', *Le Monde* (Paris, 9 July 1974), p. 15; Philip French, 'Iago Disguised as Othello', *The Times* (London, 28 June 1974), p.12.

[197] B. T., 'Général Idi Amin Dada de Barbet Schroeder: un document anarchiste contre le pouvoir', *Le Quotidien de Paris* (Paris, 30 May 1974), p.9.

> document – une analyse sérieuse de l'économie du pays, c'est parce qu'Idi Dada [sic] n'en a cure.[198]

Chapier's description of Amin as a 'phenomenon of nature', and of the film (which he refers to as a 'document' rather than a 'documentaire') as devoid of any 'mise en scène' clearly endorses Schroeder's claim to neutrality. The subjectivity which is reflected in the film is supposed to be Amin's own, the fact that the film constantly focuses on him is explained by Amin's 'delirious narcissism',[199] and even the omission of issues such as economics is attributed to Amin's incompetence. Comparably, the critic from the communist *L'Humanité,* who contended that the film's sponsors were probably hoping to mock Africa and Africans, exonerated Schroeder on the grounds of his 'objectivity', which, according to him, thwarted those initial intentions: 'Il s'est […], je crois, totalement et très sincèrement effacé devant le sujet *humain*, devant le sujet *social* abordé'.[200] As these comments suggest, the notion that what the documentary was representing was only the truth played a crucial role in assuaging the ethical and political concerns that might otherwise have been raised.

The tumultuous developments which followed the film's release allowed Schroeder to take his claims to neutrality even further. Schroeder had sent a shorter version of his film to Amin, who declared himself entirely satisfied with it. But upon hearing that European audiences were laughing in screenings of the finished documentary, Amin sent emissaries to report on its actual content and on the audiences' reactions. He then rounded up a hundred and fifty French expatriates in Kampala and used them as hostages to force Schroeder to make some cuts. Amin asked for and obtained four cuts, totalling 2 minutes and 21 seconds. The first one involved archive footage of public executions, which Schroeder used to introduce his portrait, probably to

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[198] Henry Chapier, 'Général Idi Amin Dada de Barbet Schroeder: le grand cirque d'Ouganda, et son président mégalomane', *Le Quotidien de Paris* (Paris, 4 June 1974), p.11.

[199] In reality, as a recent interview of Schroeder reveals, this was clearly the director's idea: 'Je lui ai dit : "je me mets à votre service pour faire un film sur vous. C'est vous qui devez me dire ce qu'on va montrer de vous". Alors il a commencé à me dire : "oui, on va montrer les achèvements industriels de l'Ouganda…" J'ai dit : "Non non non. Si vous êtes là dans le cadre pour nous présenter les grands résultats industriels de l'Ouganda, bien entendu tout de suite. Mais on ne va pas aller filmer quoi que ce soit sans vous"'. 'Entretien avec Barbet Schroeder par Jean Douchet' in *Général Idi Amin Dada: Autoportrait*, dir. by Barbet Schroeder (Carlotta films, 2007).

[200] Albert Cervoni, 'Une farce et un document: "Général Idi Amin Dada", de Barbet Schroeder', *L'Humanité* (Paris, 5 June 1974), p.16.

prevent viewers from taking Amin as a mere buffoon. The second cut follows a particularly tense and theatrical Cabinet meeting, in which the Foreign Minister is scolded by Amin for being 'weak'. In the finished version of the film, Schroeder had inserted a comment saying 'two weeks later, the body of Michael Ondoga, Minister of Foreign Affairs, was found in the Nile. He was replaced by a former model, Princess Bagaya, who holds a law degree from Oxford', accompanied by a shot of the minister's face and a black and white picture of his replacement. The third cut is a sequence where Schroeder and Amin share a laugh about a telegram sent by Amin to Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere: 'I want to assure you that I love you very much and if you had been a woman I would have considered marrying you although your head is full of grey hairs. But as you are a man that possibility does not arise'. Finally, Amin also asked that the last sentence of the documentary be cut, which said: 'After a century of colonisation, let us not forget that it is partially a deformed image of our own selves that Idi Amin Dada reflects back at us'. All the cuts, except this last sentence, have now been reintegrated into the Criterion edition DVD. This censorship was widely publicized by Schroeder and the missing scenes were indicated in the film. Audiences were presented with a note detailing the content of the cuts that said: 'This has now become a film by Idi Amin Dada, with Barbet Schroeder as an assistant'.[201] However, Schroeder's disclaimer is of course highly ironic, and if Amin's final cuts, flagged within the film, prove something, it is not that he had control over the film but rather the opposite. In cutting only 2'21 minutes, Amin revealed his inability to understand how and why the film was ridiculing and undermining him. Amin's incompetence and deranged personality shine throughout, and to take just one example, his proud exhibition of the 'Protocol of the Elders of Zion' as a classified document proving the existence of an Israeli plot to conquer the world's holy places probably did as much to discredit him as any of the passages he chose to censor.

Throughout the film, Schroeder successfully draws an opposition between his own purported neutrality and the orchestrated nature of Amin's self-representation,

[201] Barbet Schroeder, 'Notes on the Cuts Made to General Idi Amin Dada Autoportrait' in *General Idi Amin Dada: Autoportrait* dir. by Barbet Schroeder (Eureka Video, 1975) <http://eurekavideo.co.uk/moc/catalogue/general-idi-amin-dada-autoportrait/essay> [accessed 26 October 2010].

thereby making him entirely responsible for the artificiality and subjectivity of the portrayal. Schroeder and his crew follow Amin with mobile equipment and frequently interview him. The focus is usually on Amin, and outside Schroeder's brief introduction, there is no narration, or music – except for the music internal to certain scenes (music that, the credits insist, was composed by Amin himself). On occasion, archive footages or photographs as well as voice-over comments by Schroeder are inserted, in order to introduce a sequence or offer complementary information, all of which often corrects or qualifies Amin's claims. However, Schroeder's comments are always phrased in the most impersonal manner, with no reference to his personal opinions. This creates the impression that Amin is the one guiding us through his own regime, while Schroeder is only offering factual illustrations or correctives. In addition, the director and his crew remain very much a semi-presence. Schroeder's questions and prompts are usually heard, but he does not normally appear directly on screen, and we never hear him engaging in conversation. In some scenes, one can nonetheless sense the influence of a manipulative off-screen relationship between Amin and the director.[202] This is the case when, for instance, Schroeder eagerly asks Amin to 'tell us a story' or heartily laughs with him in order to encourage his confidences. But crucially, even in these moments, Schroeder encodes himself not as an authorial presence, but as a mere relay for the spectator's curiosity and amusement.

Amin, on the other hand, is presented as obsessed with *mise-en-scène*. The editing carefully includes several of his comments on the making of the film. For instance, on a boat cruise, we hear him say 'this is a very good picture you can get'. Similarly, in a scene in which Amin organizes a military exercise, simulating the capture of the Golan Heights, the focus stays on him rather than on the operations. Amin can be seen rushing the cameraman and shouting 'Film! Film the helicopter' while pointing at the sky. This theatricality is reflected at the thematic level of the film, which,

[202] Schroeder himself gave a glimpse of this dynamic in an interview, in which he admitted to having influenced Amin in order to obtain the Cabinet meeting scene: 'ça c'est la seule scène où j'ai dû insister un petit peu. Ça c'était mon idée et j'ai dit : "les gens vont croire que vous êtes un dictateur, il faut absolument qu'on donne l'impression qu'il y a quand même d'autres gens qui partagent le pouvoir avec vous, c'est très important pour votre image". Et en insistant donc on est arrivé à cette scène qui effectivement est une des plus extraordinaires'. 'Entretien avec Barbet Schroeder par Jean Douchet' in *Général Idi Amin Dada*, dir. by Schroeder. The influence of the argument Schroeder made to Amin is visible in the way Amin heavily insists on the necessity for his Ministers to be autonomous instead of always taking orders from him.

crucially, features mostly a series of enactments, or events which already imply staging: military drills, parades, public speeches. Furthermore, when the artificiality of a scene is not sufficiently self-evident, Schroeder explicitly uses voice-over comments to expose Amin's heavy-handed manipulations. For instance, when Amin examines some weapons which have supposedly been captured by his soldiers, Schroeder tells us: 'the General has already reviewed these arms several times'. Another noteworthy intervention occurs in a scene which represents Amin's helicopter landing near a village and the enthusiastic welcome of the population. A series of medium-shots show women and children assembling, under the direction of soldiers. Schroeder's voice is then heard: 'as with many other scenes in this film, the people's welcome in a small garrison town was specially organized for the film'. At this point, Amin's helicopter appears and we see first a long shot of the well-ordered crowd, and then another shot following the graceful movements of the helicopter as it lands, stirring up the sand of the trail. But with typical irony, the frame is then displaced in order to focus on the 'extras', who have to run away from the dust stirred by the helicopter in the most disorderly fashion, thus ruining the whole effect of majesty. The irony is reinforced by the fact that this scene may read like a parody of the imposing opening of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, in which Hitler's plane lands on the city of Nuremberg to be welcomed by an enthusiastic crowd.[203] The issues raised by Schroeder's film may also be reminiscent of the controversy surrounding Riefenstahl's 'documentary', especially the much debated issue of whether or not the events depicted, and particularly the enthusiasm of the German crowd, had been staged for the cameras. Some of Riefenstahl's defenders argue that the film is not a work of propaganda and claim that it only recorded the theatricality of the 1934 convention of the Nazi party. According to Thomas Hinton, for instance, the close-ups of faces in the crowd are only an attempt 'to approximate on film the induced hysteria' of the participants.[204] But even if one were to accept this interpretation, it is quite clear that Riefenstahl's film does not expose the manipulation at work and in fact strives to espouse the *mise-en-scène* of the event. Here Schroeder does exactly the opposite and relies on the constructedness of the

[203] *Triumph of the Will*, dir. by Leni Riefenstahl (Universum Film AG, 1935).

[204] David B. Hinton, *The Films of Leni Riefenstahl*, 2nd edn (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1991), p. xii.

scene he shoots to convey his own claim to documentary neutrality.[205] Indeed, by being able to demystify Amin's (unconvincing) attempts to create a fantasized vision of himself and the world around him, the film is able to further its own claim to documentary realism.

The build-up of this tension between Amin and Schroeder is what serves as the main driving force of the film. A striking characteristic of Schroeder's documentary is its apparent absence of story line. Its progression does not seem to obey any obvious chronology, be it that of Amin's life, of the events depicted, or that of the making of the film. On the surface, the narrative may even appear slightly repetitive. Contrary to *The Last King of Scotland*, Schroeder's film is not organized around the gradual revelation of Amin's crimes; the disclosure of Amin's atrocities happens right at the beginning, with the inclusion of archive footage of public executions. Instead, the documentary is structured around the confrontation between the objective director and the deluded, attention-seeking dictator, who tries to turn the film into a work of propaganda. This is particularly well illustrated in a passage where Schroeder starts interviewing Amin in the gardens of Entebbe Palace, among some of his eighteen children. We learn that this interview was simultaneously filmed by Ugandan television, and was later broadcast as part of national news, Schroeder and his crew becoming proof of the international interest and admiration Amin claimed to inspire. On the images from Ugandan Television, the framing is wider than in Schroeder's shots, so that the director and his collaborators appear directly on screen. These images were re-used by Schroeder, who inserted excerpts of this televised version of the discussion into his own interview. The artificial and mediated character of the scene broadcast by Ugandan Television is underlined by the fact that the Ugandan version of the interview was captured on a television set, which was included in the frame. The black and white imagery contrasts heavily with the immediacy of Schroeder's colour photography, and the comically lifeless delivery of the Ugandan anchorman makes the scene sound like a badly acted play. Again, Amin's attempt to turn the documentary into a means of propaganda is used to foreground the

[205] In the critical essay accompanying the Criterion DVD edition of the film, David Ehrenstein too makes reference to *Triumph of the Will*, arguing that 'it's likely that the outwardly pleasant yet deeply psychotic dictator was expecting a modestly scaled retread of *Triumph of the Will*'. See David Ehrenstein, 'General Idi Amin Dada (film Essay)', 2002 <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/202-general-idi-amin-dada> [accessed 26 October 2010].

'naturalness' of Schroeder's own images, and enables the documentarist to present his version as the reality of the scene, while the Ugandan news broadcast appears less competent and a partial distortion.

Schroeder's interview of Amin

Broadcast by Ugandan television

This tension between Amin's version of reality and Schroeder's finds its resolution in the last shot of the film, which consists of a close-up of Amin's face, in complete silence, except for his loud breathing sounds. The image is completely at odds with the relaxed and humorous persona that is on display during most of the documentary: Amin's eyes are moving quickly, and a rapid succession of emotions crosses his face, making him look in turn threatening, vulnerable, bored, scared, and suspicious. The shot seems to have been taken from a previous scene, in which Amin is addressing an assembly of doctors. This is visibly a stressful occasion for him and at several moments, Amin appears overwhelmed, incapable of addressing the questions of this educated audience in a convincing manner: he wrings his hands, congratulates them on their remarkable achievements in primary school and advises them not to get drunk. His uneasiness is deftly underlined by the soundtrack, in which Amin's heavy sighs and gulping sounds have been amplified. In the final images, this context is now erased, and the doctors are no longer seen or heard. The shot, certainly one of the most poignant in the film, becomes the visual conclusion of the portrayal and arguably works as the film's final 'moment of truth'. It constitutes the triumph of the supposed objectivity of the director over a frightened Amin, whose disturbed subjectivity seems finally exposed. Initially, the images were accompanied by Schroeder's last voice-over comment: 'After a century of colonization, let us not forget that it is partially a deformed image of our own selves that Idi Amin Dada

reflects back at us'. The function of this sentence, modelled on Jean Rouch's introduction to *Les Maîtres fous* ('Et ce jeu violent n'est que le reflet de notre civilisation'[206]), was to encourage self-reflexivity on the part of European audiences, and according to Schroeder, it 'attempted to explain the character and sought to avoid racist nuances in the film'.[207] Beyond the last-minute critique of colonialism, the choice of words is significant: Amin is said to 'reflect back' the European audience's own image, but in insisting on this direct reflection, the sentence is implicitly leaving out the mediating role of the film itself. Thus, one critic commented enthusiastically about this shot: 'Rien n'est imposé. Rien n'est dicté. Tout est à voir, à décrypter, à regarder, à attendre et à entendre'.[208] From this perspective, this last image not only appears objective but is supposed to contain 'everything': the whole truth about Amin is there, waiting to be deciphered.

Schroeder's final close-up.

All this highlights one of the most impressive achievements of Schroeder's film, i.e. its complex manipulation of the codes and expectations associated with documentary realism. Insisting on Amin's own *mise-en-scène* offered Schroeder an ideal foil against which to present his own images as objective. This strategy engaged and displaced what Bill Nichols has described as the most basic assumptions defining the documentary form, namely the belief that what is represented on screen has not been staged for the purpose of being filmed:

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[206] *Les Maîtres fous*, dir. by Jean Rouch (Films du jeudi, 1955).

[207] Schroeder, 'Notes on the Cuts'. At the time of the film's initial release, many reviewers underlined that the insertion of this sentence felt artificial and heavy-handed. Both Jean de la Guérivière in *Le Monde* and Jean-Loup Passek in *Combat* called it a 'pirouette', while Henri Chapier described it as an 'alibi final'. Jean de la Guérivière, '"Général Idi Amin Dada de Barbet Schroeder"', *Le Monde* (Paris, 31 May 1974), p.15; Jean-Loup Passek, '*Général Idi Amin Dada*. Ubu noir', *Combat* (Paris, 3 June 1974), p.13; Chapier, p.11.

[208] Cervoni, p.11.

> Since documentary does not address the fictive space of classic narrative but historiographic space, the premise and assumption prevails that what occurred in front of the camera was not entirely enacted with the camera in mind. It would have existed, the events would have unfolded, the social actors would have lived and made a presentation of themselves in everyday life irrespective of the camera's presence.
>
> Though subject to extensive qualification and subversion, this serves as a founding premise, a starting point which the documentary film viewer will accept as given until proven wrong.[209]

By insisting on the fact that everything has been staged by Amin, Schroeder is introducing the divide between fiction and nonfiction within his own documentary, only to reassert its claim to nonfictionality. Indeed, the whole film is constructed as a rejection and a demystification of Amin's fictions, but this fictionality is presented as the exclusive property of the profilmic scene and does not contaminate Schroeder's 'document'.

In exploring these strategies I of course have no intention of defending Amin, and I do not necessarily wish to imply that Schroeder's images are 'untrue'. Indeed, opposing the presence of Schroeder's subjectivity and authorial interventions to 'truth' would be reproducing the very opposition of objectivity and subjectivity that was staged in the film. As Michael Chanan writes:

> It is one thing to recognize this dose or dimension of subjectivity in the image. It doesn't follow that it is therefore not a true image. For that would be to assume an equation in which the subjective is opposed to the objective, and the objective is identified with truth.[210]

Rather, the point I have wanted to emphasize is that judgments on the political and ethical aspects of the film were deeply influenced by the fact that it was perceived as a mere representation of reality; yet this perception was itself the result of a complex play with the aesthetics of documentary.

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[209] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 78.

[210] Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 50.

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It is certainly a tribute to the compelling character of Schroeder's last shot that Kevin McDonald chose to edit it into *The Last King of Scotland*, just before the closing credits, thereby reinforcing its status as a repository of Amin's true character. In fact, this is only one of several intertextual echoes between them. In addition to this direct quotation, some scenes from the documentary have been re-enacted as part of the fiction. The most noticeable is a scene in which Amin cheats in a swimming race with some of his collaborators, who would obligingly let him win anyway. In the documentary, Amin blocks the way for his competitors, which may still seem inadvertent, while in the film, the cheating is made more obvious as Amin jumps in the water before the race has started. Both scenes were shot at the same swimming pool in Kampala's Sheraton hotel, and in both cases, Amin comes first and receives the servile congratulations of his entourage. Another echo is discernible in the way Amin reminisces over his deprived childhood and training in the British army. In the documentary, the confidence is addressed to Schroeder, while in the fiction, Amin is speaking to Garrigan. Both tirades start with similar sentences, respectively: 'I come from very poor family, I wanted to tell you this', and: 'I come from very poor family, I think you should know this'. More generally, Whitaker seems to have made extensive use of the documentary to build his performance, borrowing some of Amin's gestures as they appear in the more informal conversations in the documentary, such as pointing his finger at his interlocutor while laughing.

This eagerness of *The Last King of Scotland* to somehow establish a connection with Schroeder's portrayal points towards one of the film's main difficulties: not being a documentary. Whereas Schroeder was able to thwart accusations of racism by claiming to have only captured the reality of Amin's foolishness, the makers of *The Last King of Scotland* found themselves in a more complicated situation. On the one hand, the nature of the subject demanded that a level of historical accuracy should be respected: being based on historical facts not only provides an ethical justification for the film, but also constitutes an important part of its dramatic appeal. On the other hand, the film being a fiction, the filmmakers did not have the same latitude to

excuse the potentially racist or stereotypical aspects of the narrative in the name of documentary truth. Thus, the screenplay carefully tiptoed around many of the elements that made Amin a popular tabloid figure, such as his declarations about Hitler, his suspected syphilis (a scene treating this question was shot but edited out), or his rumoured cannibalism (the rumours are only mentioned once, by Amin himself, who vehemently denies them). In one of the most noted scenes of the film, Amin was even given the opportunity to respond to the attacks of Western journalists during a press conference, in which he craftily seduces the press. The ways in which the film attempted to negotiate between, on the one hand, the pressures towards historical truth and, on the other hand, the necessity to produce a socially acceptable portrayal of Amin, constitutes one of the most interesting and problematic aspects of the production.

The first strategy used by the filmmakers to legitimate their representation consisted in claiming a degree of historical truthfulness. First, the film is introduced by this message: 'This film is inspired by real people and events', and nowhere are the alterations or condensations operated by the narrative detailed or explained, thus suggesting that it sets out to be a basically faithful historical chronicle. Comparably, the film ends with a return to historical time and reality. The ending depicts Garrigan's flight from Uganda, hidden among the hostages of the (historical) Entebbe crisis. After a last close-up of Garrigan's bruised and bloody face in the plane, a text appears which stitches the two temporalities of history and fiction back together: '48 hours later, Israeli forces stormed Entebbe and liberated all but one of the hostages'. There follow a few archive images of Uganda after Amin's demise and during Amin's rule, some information on Amin's killing of more than 300,000 Ugandans, and, finally, the insertion of Schroeder's close-up. The notation '48 hours later' is particularly striking since, located as it is after a shot of Garrigan, it seems to situate those historical events '48 hours after Garrigan's flight from Uganda', i.e. 48 hours after a fictional event, rather than 48 hours after the release of the non-Israeli hostages from Entebbe. In doing so, the film suggests a continuity, if not an equivalence, between its own temporality and that of history, as well as between its own images and the archives it quotes.

The film's inscription within history was also strongly present in its promotional materials, which played an important role in setting audiences' expectations. For instance, much emphasis was placed on the fact that *The Last King of Scotland* was shot in Uganda, with a largely Ugandan crew – an exceptional fact, as most commercial films set in Africa are shot in Nigeria or South Africa, regardless of the actual country depicted. This argument has been used by both MacDonald and Whitaker to counter any suggestion that the film was a 'Hollywood-filtered' and 'white' representation of Africa. Giles Foden, in an account of the film's premiere in Kampala, quotes Whitaker as saying 'Almost half the crew was Ugandan, a great proportion of the cast was Ugandan, and the people who advised me on how to play Amin were Ugandan. Those things infused themselves into the movie'.[211] Kevin MacDonald also underlines in the DVD commentary of the film that minute attention was given to historical details, and that great efforts were made to retrieve, for instance, Amin's car or Amin's tailor. Whitaker's performance was also central to the film's claim to truthfulness. Not only did it earn *The Last King of Scotland* an Oscar, it was also the focus of much of its reception. Indeed, virtually no review or interview failed to dwell on Whitaker's acquired resemblance to Amin and on his extreme form of method acting: Whitaker learned Swahili and the accordion, spent weeks with Amin's family and friends, and stayed in character during most of the shoot, eating only the same food Amin would eat, and never parting from his new Ugandan accent.[212] In the DVD commentary, the director claims that during the shooting of Amin's speech to the crowd at the beginning of the film, some of the Ugandan extras actually thought that it was the real Amin and wondered why he was repeating the same speech several times.[213] The representation of Whitaker's performance as a near case of possession or haunting reverses the terms in which Amin's own performance as himself in Schroeder's documentary was perceived. In the documentary, it was paradoxically the inauthenticity of Amin which served to 'naturalize' the documentary, whereas in Macdonald's fiction, it is the notion of a

[211] Giles Foden, 'What Would Africa Think of the Last King?', *The Daily Telegraph* (London, 19 February 2007), p. 27.

[212] An example among many others of such accounts of Whitaker's method acting: Brian Pendreigh, 'The Motion Picture King of Scotland', *Sunday Times* (London, 14 January 2007), section Features, p. 2.

[213] Commentary by Kevin Macdonald in *The Last King of Scotland*, dir. by Kevin Macdonald (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007).

genuine merging between Whitaker and his character which was used as a signal for the film's authenticity.

But, as I said before, although these claims to historical truthfulness were a means of avoiding accusations of racism, the film also mobilized another set of strategies, this time through its fictional framing. In spite of its inscription in real historical events, the film's aesthetics leave no doubt as to its fictional nature: there is no play with the conventional codes of documentary (interviews of 'witnesses', out-of-focus shots, shaky images, underexposure, etc.); the camera has unlimited access even to the most private moments of the characters' lives; and each scene is filmed from different angles, which are seamlessly edited together. This aesthetic code creates a set of expectations different from that of a documentary or nonfictional representation. As Bill Nichols argues in *Representing Reality*, recent works of criticism have increasingly underlined the proximity between fiction and nonfiction, particularly their shared dependence on narrative conventions. But, as Nichols emphasizes, in spite of this common textuality and constructedness, and even if we admit that 'documentariness' and 'fictionality' may not reside in ontological particularities of the filmic text, the distinction between them nonetheless intervenes at the level of the viewer's expectations:

> Documentary shares the properties of a text with other fictions – matter and energy are not at its immediate disposal – but it addresses the world in which we live rather than worlds in which we may imagine living. This may be partly a matter of conventions and expectations, but it makes a fundamental difference.[214]

As Nichols puts it a few pages later, fiction only purports to represent '*a* world', however realistic it might be, while documentary creates the expectation that it will represent '*the* world'. Even those documentaries that try to acknowledge their own subjective or ideological biases do not claim to represent just '*a* world' but '*a* view of *the* world'.[215] Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that audiences will not look for a factual account in an openly fictional narrative and that few would consider a fictional representation as offering direct access to reality. In this situation, truth still plays a role, but this time the model at work is that of

[214] Nichols, p. 112.

[215] Ibid., p. 115.

vraisemblance, in accordance with Gérard Genette's definition: 'Le récit vraisemblable est […] un récit dont les actions répondent, comme autant d'applications ou de cas particuliers, à un corps de maximes reçues comme vraies par le public auquel il s'adresse'.[216] The narrative is thus judged in relation to accepted representations of the social world, informed by conceptions of what is 'possible' and 'acceptable', rather than in relation to historical accuracy.

The filmmakers were therefore able to capitalize on the insertion of the fictional Garrigan in order to give another meaning to the depiction of Amin's regime. The description of Amin's rule is indeed inscribed within a larger narrative framework in which the selfish and reckless Garrigan, who has chosen to turn a blind eye to Amin's crimes and to become his close collaborator, is gradually made to face the consequences of his actions, as he himself becomes the victim of Amin's madness and brutality. The presence of Garrigan displaces the focus away from Amin to a critique of the white man's perception of him, thereby transforming the Scottish doctor into a representative of the Western world's irresponsibility vis-à-vis Amin and Africa. To highlight this, I would like to turn to one of the few negative appraisals of *The Last King of Scotland*, published by novelist Vanessa Walters in *The Guardian*'s 'Comment and Debate' section. Walters criticized the film for the high degree of attention it gives to the white Garrigan, and described it as 'a white story for white audiences'.[217] She explicitly distanced herself from the film's other reviewers and argued that its success came from manipulating clichés about Africa:

> Most reviewers have failed to clock the fact that "the white man trying to save ethnic man" from himself is a well-worn caricature. Nor do they question the other easy stereotypes that crop up in the film. Apart from the scary men running around Uganda with AK47s, there is a plethora of scantily clad go-go-dancers and other exotic, sexually available women to be bedded by Garrigan – including one of Amin's wives.[218]

It might be retorted that Walters's argument fails to do justice to the complexity of the film's strategies. First, Walters grounds her argument on a theory according to

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[216] Gérard Genette, *Figures II. Essais* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 77.

[217] Vanessa Walters, 'Stereotypes That Will Sell: The Last King of Scotland Is Not the African Idi Amin Story: It Is a White Story for White Audiences', *The Guardian* (London, 18 January 2007), section Comment & Debate, p. 30.

[218] Walters, p. 30.

which ‘moviegoers want to watch people they are interested in: themselves; and they demand the all-important catharsis at the end of the film to provide them with a new understanding about who they are. And since the majority of the western film-going public is white, then that self on screen must also be white’.[219] Although the notion of a radical incapacity of white audiences to identify with black characters is highly disputable, it is true that throughout the film the spectator is invited to share Garrigan’s experiences. But this process of ‘identification’ has more to do with narrative strategies than with any immediate empathy based on racial solidarity. It is Garrigan’s unrest which provides the starting point of the story, as he decides to travel to Uganda in order to escape the quiet and uneventful life that awaits him in Scotland. Throughout the narrative, Garrigan is present in all sequences and the spectator discovers Amin and Uganda at the same time as he does. In fact, Amin is always seen in his presence, and is entirely perceived through their relation, from Garrigan’s perspective. The film itself, in its colour palette, rhythm and music, reflects Garrigan’s interiority. The first part, characterized by lush landscapes, a luminous, saturated photography, and festive music, transmits something of Garrigan’s initial wonder and excitement. In the second part, nightly or interior scenes become predominant, and the film’s rhythm becomes more erratic as Garrigan discovers Amin’s horrifying violence. This proximity to Garrigan’s point of view is also underlined visually at several points. For instance, during a party scene in which Garrigan gets drunk and broods over his own predicament, the camera reflects his drunkenness and inner turmoil through a series of flashbacks and visual effects that mimic his mental and physical state of confusion.

The photography mimics Garrigan’s drunken vision.

[219] Ibid., p. 30.

This focus on Garrigan's own vision of reality is crucial: taken as reflections of Garrigan's irresponsible and hedonistic perception of Uganda, the groovy music, the children running alongside the car, and the sexually available women can be recuperated within a critique of the Scottish doctor's exoticizing vision. For instance, when Garrigan is blamed by Amin for coming to Africa only 'to fuck and take away', the film seems to form a retrospective judgement on the way the character easily seduced black women in the first half. This is what was suggested by Kevin McDonald, in his comments on the ethical and political difficulties of representing Amin:

> I wouldn't have made the story if it had just been about Idi Amin and Uganda. It's up to a Ugandan or African film-maker to tell Idi Amin's story, but the experience I understand is what it's like to be a young Scot going to Africa, because I've done that myself. So the film is told from Garrigan's point of view and is about the relationship between Britain and Uganda. Still, I was wary about using the Third World as an exotic backdrop and having a white hero, which is why Garrigan is morally ambiguous.[220]

In reality, Walters's accusations and Macdonald's self-consciousness are two faces of the same coin. By espousing the point of view of Garrigan, the film is able not only to represent, but in fact to reproduce the enjoyment experienced by the character, while later disavowing its own representation of Africa by conducting a critique of Garrigan. If we accept Walters's premise that 'scary men running around Uganda with AK47s' and exotic, sexually available women contribute to a stereotyped vision of Africa, there is no doubt that the film capitalizes on it at the same time as it criticizes it.

But beyond this contradiction lies another one. Although the two strategies of historical and fictional legitimation seem to be oriented toward a same objective, i.e. avoiding accusations of racism, their coexistence raises a number of difficulties. At first, *The Last King of Scotland*'s exploration of the imagined relationship between a historical character, Amin, and a fictional one, Nicholas Garrigan, seems to be driven by history. The film is carried by two converging narrative lines: the history of Amin's reign, the main points of which need to be respected by the film, and the unfolding of Garrigan's fictional doings. Asked in an interview about the

[220] Ali Jaafar, 'Warped Love Story: Interview with Kevin Macdonald', *Sight and Sound*, 2007, p. 35.

delimitation between fiction and history in his film, Kevin Macdonald argued: 'tout ce qui se passe en public est vrai ; tout ce qui relève de la sphère privée, en revanche, est inventé'.[221] Indeed, at the beginning, Garrigan is simply 'pasted' into the most important historical events, but has no impact on them. Thus, he arrives in Uganda during Amin's coup and is present when an attempt is made on Amin's life by some of Obote's partisans. His agency is limited to imagined but plausible events in Amin's private life, with little historical significance: a minor car accident, Amin's panic over some digestive troubles, an intervention in an architectural competition, Amin's son having an epileptic seizure. Of course, the insertion of Garrigan does disrupt some historical facts. For instance, Garrigan takes the place of one of the characters after which he was modelled, Amin's Scottish advisor Bob Astles, who played a significant role in managing Amin's public relations and bore little resemblance to Garrigan. But overall, it can be said that the first half of the film maintains a rather clear distinction between the public dimension of Amin's rule, in which the narrative follows historical facts, and the private sphere, in which the story is driven by fictional *vraisemblance*.

This precarious balance between history and fiction becomes significantly more complicated in the second part of the film. The turning point of Garrigan's involvement with Amin is the moment when he denounces Jonah Wasswa, Amin's Health Minister, whom he saw in conversation with an unknown white man in a bar. This will lead to the assassination of the minister by Amin, and to a reversal of his relationship with Garrigan. After hearing from a British official that Wasswa was not conspiring but only trying to secure a pharmaceutical deal in order to help the population, Garrigan decides to leave the country, but Amin forces him to stay. This event, which establishes the loss of Garrigan's innocence and his participation in the brutality of the regime, remains on the side of fiction but crosses the line between the private and public spheres, which so far separated history from fiction. Jonah Wasswa is a fictional character, and if his execution is reminiscent of the fate of Amin's Foreign Minister mentioned in Schroeder's documentary, the circumstances of the two events are too different to be conflated. The ambiguity of this episode resurfaces when Garrigan is confronted by a diplomat of the British Foreign Office,

[221] Olivier Bonnard, 'Le Roi et moi', *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Paris, 15 February 2007), p. 22.

who shows him pictures of the murders and torture organized by Amin. In the images Garrigan is looking at, archive photographs of Amin's victims have been mixed with pictures of the fictional Jonah Wasswa's assassination and interspersed with re-enactments of the scenes. In the DVD commentary, Macdonald confesses his initial qualms about mixing historical and fictional pictures in this scene, but to justify his decision argues 'we are telling a true story'. This suggests again the ambiguous ways in which claims to historical faithfulness work in the film, as it is not clear whether archive pictures are used to make the fictional ones look more credible, or whether the use of fake archives is justified by the fact that they nonetheless serve the film's general commitment to truthfulness.

This involvement of Garrigan in the historical part of the story grows with Amin's transformation into a brutal tyrant. The escalation of violence in the movie is triggered by Garrigan's affair with Amin's wife, Kay – an invention of the film's screenwriters which does not appear in Foden's novel. Kay gets pregnant and, desperate to get rid of the baby, travels to her village to undergo an abortion, as Garrigan is unable to perform the operation. When she is seen again, in an unusually gory scene, her body has been dismembered and sewn back together, with her arms in the place of her legs and vice-versa. Amin's responsibility for this is clearly established in a later scene, in which he tells Garrigan 'I made an example of her'. Here, Garrigan's destiny has become closely intertwined with actual historical events, as the real Kay Amin did disappear in mysterious circumstances. Accounts of the events diverge but many agree that Kay, who had been repudiated along with two of Amin's other wives, had an affair with a doctor. She fell pregnant and asked him to perform an abortion. Her dismembered body was then found in the boot of her lover's car, who had just committed suicide. If many consider Amin the probable instigator of her murder, his guilt has never been clearly established. Amin always maintained that Kay died during the abortion and that the doctor and his assistant had dismembered the body in order to disguise her death as a ritual crime. This is also the version supported by Henry Kyemba's otherwise merciless indictment of Amin:

> I do not believe, as I first did, that Amin had a direct hand in Kay's death. If he had ordered her murder, he would never have chosen such a complicated way to have it done. There would have been no need to court publicity when she could have simply disappeared without

> a trace. The case will probably remain unsolved, a weird backwater in the mainstream of Ugandan affairs.[222]

The representation of Kay's death in *The Last King of Scotland* was also explicitly criticized in an article published in 2007 by two Ugandan journalists who, after investigating various reports and testimonies, concluded: 'Although there has never been an explanation as to what really happened prior to and immediately after Kay's death, investigations leave no doubt that Kay's death was a result of excessive bleeding during a failed abortion'. [223]

It is therefore in the incertitude of the historical record that the film chose to place one of its most disturbing scenes. In this instance, the necessity of taking Amin and Garrigan's relationship forward led the film to choose between several unattested versions of the events, perhaps at the expense of historical accuracy. A particularly troubling detail is the fact that *The Last King of Scotland* may not only have distorted historical facts but also exaggerated the horror by sewing Kay's legs to her torso and her arms to her hips. Indeed, testimonies concur to say that the body had been dismembered and then sewn back together, but the inversion featured in the film seems completely apocryphal and mostly motivated by the quest for graphic spectacle. In the documentary enclosed with the DVD edition, both James McAvoy and Forest Whitaker express a level of discomfort at the fact that, as Whitaker says, 'that image will stick with people... and yet it is not true'.[224] Andrea Calderwood, the producer of the film, contends on the other hand that it was used to show Amin's real violence and offered 'a powerful moment to dramatize Idi's stream of mind'.[225] The ambiguity of the word 'dramatize' is quite fitting here as the scene merges its two meanings of 'putting into dramatic form' and 'exaggerating'. In this defence of the scene, Calderwood's argumentation hangs precariously between truth and *vraisemblance* and provides a good illustration of the film's increasing confusion between the two: according to her, the scene communicates something true about

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[222] Kyemba, pp. 158-159.

[223] Elizabeth Namazzi and Rehema Aanyu, 'Kay Amin – How She Met Her Death', *The New Vision* (Kampala, 16 June 2007) <http://allafrica.com/stories/200706180593.html> [accessed 17 January 2011].

[224] Fran Robertson, 'Capturing Idi Amin', DVD extra in *The Last King of Scotland*, dir. by Macdonald.

[225] Ibid.

Amin, namely that he was so violent and deranged that he *could have* killed and mutilated his wife, even though claiming that he did may actually be untrue.[226]

The encroachment of fiction over the film escalates when the screenplay starts toying with the possibility that Garrigan might assassinate Amin to avenge Kay's death. Obviously, the necessity of maintaining a level of historical credibility means that this attempt cannot succeed. Garrigan gets caught, leading to the film's other most graphic scene, in which he is hanged by two hooks, stuck in his pectorals. This development is set at the same time as the hostage crisis at Entebbe airport, and Garrigan's torture is located in the airport's duty-free shop. The gruesome treatment of the fictional character eclipses the exploration of the Entebbe crisis, which is

[226] Calderwood's justification echoes a common argument about fictional and filmic representations of history, according to which films convey a different and perhaps higher form of truth. For instance, one of the most influential studies about the relation between film and historiography, Robert Rosenstone's *Visions of the Past*, sets out to assess the historical value of film through a distinction between 'true invention' and 'false invention'. According to Rosenstone, the 1988 film *Mississippi Burning* directed by Alan Parker, which depicts the Freedom Summer of 1964, uses 'false' invention and 'must be judged as bad history':

> Taking for its heroes two FBI men, the film marginalizes blacks and insists that though they are victims of racism, they had in fact little to do with their own voting rights drive. The resulting message is that the government protected African-Americans and played a major role in the voter registration drive of Freedom Summer. Yet this is palpably untrue. This story simply excludes too much of what we already know [...]. The central message of that summer, as responsible historians have shown, was not simply that blacks were oppressed, but that they worked as a community to alleviate their own oppression. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 72-73.

Conversely, the 1989 film *Glory*, directed by Edward Zwick about the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment commanded by Robert Gould Shaw is said to be 'as inventive as *Mississippi Burning*' but to engage in true invention. For instance, the film implies that most of the soldiers in the Fifty-fourth were ex-slaves, which was not actually the case. According to Rosenstone, this 'alteration' of reality can be justified 'by suggesting that it serves to bring the particular experience of this unit into line with the larger experience of African-Americans in the Civil War, to generalize from the Fifty-fourth to what happened elsewhere in the Union to slaves who were freed'. Rosenstone, pp. 73-74. Another example is that in the film, the racist quartermaster of the division refuses to give boots to the black troops, when in fact there is no record of such an event. Again, Rosenstone contends that 'this is the invention of a truth', i.e. a 'true invention' because it is 'an invention of something that could well have happened'. Rosenstone, p. 74.

As this last example clearly shows, Rosenstone's discrimination between 'true' and 'false' invention ends up resembling a mere rephrasing of the notion of *vraisemblance*: are considered 'true' those inventions which fit with Rosenstone's general conception of 'what could well have happened', whereas those that do not are deemed 'false'. The factors that are examined in order to determine whether or not something could have happened are complex and include not only a general conception of the past ('what we already know', the work of unnamed 'responsible historians', 'the larger experience of African-Americans in the Civil War') but also ethical and political concerns. It is probably not a mere coincidence that it is the film which, according to Rosenstone, 'seems to reinforce the racism it ostensibly combats' that is deemed 'false', while it is the one which is mostly congruent with Rosenstone's own ideas that is described as 'true'. Rosenstone, p. 73. In this case, history is only *vraisemblable*, and nothing seems to distinguish it from fiction anymore.

supposed to be taking place in the next room. Significantly, while torturing Garrigan, Amin makes this pronouncement: 'We are not a game, Nicholas. We are real. This room here, it is real. I think your death will be the first real thing that has happened to you'. Within the diegesis, this sentence is a rather straightforward condemnation of Garrigan's irresponsible quest for adventure, while the duty-free shop offers a metaphor of the capitalist and touristic commodification of Africa in which his self-indulgent behaviour participates. Amin's lines bring a conclusion to the theme of the white character's derealization of Uganda, which has been running throughout the film. For instance, after the attack against Amin, we see Garrigan putting water on his face, as if to wake himself up from a bad dream. Similarly, after sleeping with Kay for the first time, Garrigan laughs at the apparently absurd idea of Kay and him in his parents' living room, highlighting how unreal everything seems to him. But Amin's lines also resound as a commentary on the narrative itself and illustrate the fiction's ambiguous claims to truth. Indeed, when Amin contends 'this room is real', he is referring to the space of the duty-free shop, where the fictional torture of Garrigan is happening, whereas by focusing on the action going on in this room, the film is precisely taking the emphasis away from the real historical Entebbe crisis, which is re-enacted in the next room. Paradoxically, Amin's critique of Garrigan's derealization of Africa is thus inserted into a passage which epitomizes the prevalence of fiction over history in the second part of the film.

The constant substitutions of *vraisemblance* and truth culminate at the end of this scene, when Garrigan is saved by the self-sacrifice of his Ugandan colleague, Dr Junju, who frees him and consequently gets killed by Amin's hitmen. The motivation of the character is hard to see: the two men are not friends but rivals, and Junju, who used to be Amin's physician before Garrigan's arrival, openly resents Garrigan's hedonism and carelessness. To conceal this lack of *vraisemblance*, a dialogue is introduced in which Garrigan asks Junju why he is acting so selflessly. The doctor answers:

> Frankly, I don't know. You deserve to die. But dead, you can do nothing. Alive, you might just be able to redeem yourself... I am tired of hatred, Doctor Garrigan. This country is drowning in it. We deserve better. Go home, tell the world the truth about Amin. They will believe you.

At this decisive and melodramatic moment, the film's narrative seems to be claiming a testimonial and even pedagogical function, since Garrigan's final escape is justified by the necessity to tell 'the truth about Amin'. The *invraisemblance* of the black character's action is justified by his own speculations about the need to make the story sound *vraisemblable* to Westerners, in terms that are reminiscent of Walters's argument concerning 'white audiences' and their empathy vis-à-vis white characters. Thus, the film seems to offer a justification for its own focus on a fictional white character in its treatment of Ugandan history: it is necessary to its *vraisemblance*. But ultimately, within the diegesis, Garrigan's story must be believed because it is the truth, whereas at the metanarrative level, the film's play between truth and fiction could be seen as a betrayal of this claim.

My aim in emphasizing these inventions and ambiguities is not simply to highlight a lack of historical accuracy in the film. As I said before, the film is clearly a fiction and it would make little sense to judge it as if it were a documentary. Numerous reviewers registered this issue: in the French newspaper *La Croix*, the film was said to be 'plus attentif à l'esprit qu'aux faits' and to be really about 'une certaine attitude occidentale qui fait de l'Afrique un "terrain de jeu"'.[227] Comparably, the reviewer in *The Guardian* described the film as 'a riveting satire of white Europe's horrified fascination with Africa as a Conradian heart of darkness'.[228] In accordance with the expectations created by the film's aesthetic and generic affiliation to fiction, most critics have paid less attention to its factual aspects than to its capacity to convey a more general truth, be it about Amin or Europe's relation to Africa. In fact, as implied by this criticism from *Le Figaro*'s reviewer: 'on hésite entre l'histoire évènementielle et le romanesque au point de douter de la vérité du tyran à la fois naïf et monstrueux, et de croire à la réalité du jeune médecin', most reviewers were aware that fictional and factual events had been mixed and that the two could not be told apart simply by focusing on textual clues.[229] Even if the reviewer of the *Los Angeles Times* did complain that 'It's a bit of a letdown to discover the events depicted are only partially factual', the fact that the partial factualness of the film is only 'a bit of

[227] A.S., 'Portrait d'un dictateur africain', *La Croix* (Paris, 14 February 2007), p.20.

[228] 'The Madness of King Idi', *The Guardian* (London, 12 January 2007), section Film reviews, p. 7.

[229] Dominique Borde, 'Le Grotesque et le tragique', *Le Figaro* (Paris, 14 February 2007), p.6.

a letdown' and not, say, 'a dangerous mystification', suggests that the film was not really expected to produce an accurate account of Amin's rule.[230]

Reviewers therefore focused more on the propriety and sensitiveness of the representation than on its accuracy. However, this leads to a paradox: part of the reason why the ethical and political aspects of the film's representation matter is that it deals with historical realities, but these realities played a fairly limited role in the assessment of *The Last King of Scotland*'s treatment of history. Indeed, when critics discussed the film's engagement with history in ethical terms, these discussions mostly remained at the level of *vraisemblance*. For instance, a reviewer in *The Financial Times* complained that in the second half, the 'film's government by historical credibility is overthrown by the rule of hokum and Hollywoodism'. Here, the elements the critic uses as examples are not linked to its lack of historical accuracy but to its 'over-accumulation of action-thriller jeopardies', which threaten its *vraisemblance*. In *Sight and Sound*, Dave Calhoun criticized a group of recent films featuring Africa for their failure to 'engage fully with African reality', which he blamed 'in part on ignorance or complacency' and on 'crude commercial pressure'.[231] His article discusses the tendency to favour colourful landscapes over political issues and violence, and notably admonishes Michael Caton-Jones's *Shooting Dogs* (2005) for failing to show 'the full horror' of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. His argument is therefore about truth and the necessity to offer an adequate representation of reality. For him, the graphic violence depicted in *The Last King of Scotland* is a positive point, as it communicates something of the truth of Amin's regime:

> To MacDonald's credit, the one scene of violence is uncompromisingly harsh: we watch one of Amin's ministers being shot and see the sliced-up body of one of his wives. But one can only wish that the film had given us less of the winsome Scot and the lush interiors of Amin's palace and more of the terror that is a rising plume of smoke in the distance.[232]

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[230] Carina Chocano, '"Last King of Scotland": Ministering to Idi Amin', *Los Angeles Times* (L.A., 27 September 2006) <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/sep/27/entertainment/et-last27> [accessed 12 September 2010].

[231] Dave Calhoun, 'White Guides, Black Pain', *Sight and Sound*, 2007, pp. 32-35 (p. 34).

[232] Calhoun, pp. 32-35 (p. 32).

Yet as I discussed earlier, the two instances of violence Calhoun refers to are not entirely factual: Wasswa's assassination is a fictional event, and the notion that Kay was murdered and 'sliced-up' by Amin is contested. Calhoun's criticism invokes historical truth but ultimately his interpretation of the film remains at the level of *vraisemblance*, since the scenes are not examined for their own truth but for their ability to illustrate a general opinion that Calhoun holds to be true, i.e. that Amin was a cruel tyrant. A similar stand was taken in the *New Statesman* by Ryan Gilbey, who criticized the alleged lack of violent imagery in the film. For him, the final reminder that Amin killed over 300,000 people only reveals the failure of the story to communicate fully the extent of his crimes: 'viewers unfamiliar with this fact will struggle to reconcile the death toll with what the film has shown'. His article mentions the images of Kay's body as the only mitigating element, insisting that they are nevertheless insufficient:

> We witness a dismemberment, shot in the picture's characteristically lurid fashion. But it is asking a lot for this murder to symbolize 300,000 deaths, and ultimately the film-makers fail to bridge the chasm between Amin's crimes, which were vast, and this particular, slender story.[233]

Gilbey's critique is premised on the assumption that the film should inform its audience about Amin's real crimes. But even though Gilbey seems to oppose his own position to that of the uninformed viewer, his review does not mention the fact that making Kay's murder stand for Amin's atrocities more generally is all the more disputable as it relies on unascertained facts. Comparably, in a recent article on afropessimism in contemporary films about Africa, Martha Evans and Ian Glenn criticize *The Last King of Scotland* for offering a truncated version of history and 'diluting social judgment' about Amin. Paradoxically, they simultaneously attack the film for not relaying the 'claims that Amin carried out many of the assassinations personally', and for including an attack on Amin's life, which, for them, 'serves to justify some of his paranoia about his position'.[234] Again, this criticism operates at two conflicting levels: it criticizes the fiction for not being historically accurate, but

[233] Ryan Gilbey, 'A String of Mangled Opportunities', *New Stateman*, 15 January 2007 <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2007/01/amin-whitaker-macdonald-king> [accessed 4 November 2010].

[234] Martha Evans and Ian Glenn, '"TIA — This Is Africa": Afropessimism in Twenty-First Century Narrative Film', *Black Camera*, 2 (2010), 14-35 (p. 30).

the attack on Amin's life represents a real historical event, since Obote's partisans did attempt an ill-organized putsch in 1972. Further examples of this confusion between truth and *vraisemblance* include comments from *Le Monde*'s critic, who seems to have entirely internalized the film's version of the events and describes the historical Amin as 'un homme qui fit mutiler et assassiner sa femme parce qu'elle lui avait été infidèle',[235] while *The Sunday Times* dismisses the same episode as 'unnecessary', making it sound like a fiction invented by the screenwriters: 'The plot gets bogged down, in the final part, in an unnecessary story line involving Amin's wife and her need for an abortion'.[236] This brief survey of the film's critical reception suggests that the focus on the ethical or political aspects of the film's representation has often led critics to overlook complex issues surrounding the construction of the narrative, which in turn raises significant ethical issues regarding the film's treatment of history. As in my discussion of Schroeder's documentary, this analysis again illustrates how ethical or political judgments are deeply influenced by perceptions of the truthfulness of a representation, which are in turn shaped by narrative strategies and assumptions regarding *vraisemblance* that do not, in fact, give the audience any firm basis on which to appraise the film's actual accuracy.

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If the makers of *The Last King of Scotland* tried to establish, through intertextual references, a relation of filiation with Barbet Schroeder's respected documentary, by contrast, *Amin: The Rise and Fall* offers precisely the kind of cliché-ridden, sensationalist depiction with which they did not want to be associated (especially as these elements do crop up in *The Last King of Scotland*, as illustrated by the treatment of Kay's death). *Amin: The Rise and Fall* offers graphic reconstitutions of Amin's atrocities, with numerous scenes of beating, torture and murder, complemented with a few soft-core passages illustrating Amin's intense sexual life. The film also contains a very explicit depiction of Amin's alleged cannibalism – a popular theme of European gory cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which

[235] Thomas Sotinel, 'Forest Whitaker', *Le Monde* (Paris, 13 February 2007), p. 14.

[236] Cosmo Landesman, 'Something Wicked This Way Comes', *Sunday Times* (London, 14 January 2007), p. 12.

saw the release of the most famous specimens of the sub-genre: *Cannibal Holocaust* (Italy, 1979) and *Cannibal Ferox* (Italy, 1981). Cannibalism features in two scenes, which have sometimes been held responsible for the rumours about Amin.[237] In the first one, Amin's physician is looking for ice and finds two human heads in the dictator's freezer, next to a bag of frozen peas. Amin, who suddenly appears behind him, rolls his eyes and says: 'Doctor! For an African you are looking very white! [...] Every time there is a change of power in Africa, a few heads must roll' – a dialogue which does little to mitigate the racist undertones of the scene. In the second scene, after ordering the murder of chief justice Benedicto Kiwanuka, who criticized the regime's abuses of power, Amin goes to the morgue and demands to be left alone with the body.[238] He then recites a ritual formula, and ingests a piece of Kiwanuka's flesh, which, as noted by several viewers, bears a disconcerting resemblance to a raw slice of bacon.[239]

Amin's freezer.

Amin performing ritual cannibalism.

The general structure of the film consists of a linear juxtaposition of vignettes, which follow quite closely the chronology of Amin's reign, from his 1971 coup to his flight into exile in 1979, after the Tanzanian invasion of Uganda. Famous historical episodes, such as the eviction of Uganda's Asian community, Kay's death, or the Entebbe hostage crisis are interspersed with other, imagined or lesser-known

[237] Moses Serugo, 'The Myths Surrounding Idi Amin', *The Monitor* (Kampala, 28 May 2007) <http://web.archive.org/web/20070528211152/http://www.monitor.co.ug/specialincludes/ugprsd/amin/articles/amin9.php> [accessed 22 January 2011].

[238] Benedicto Kiwanuka is a historical character who was also the first Prime Minister of Uganda and 'disappeared' during Amin's reign.

[239] Other popular hypotheses include doner meat and parma ham. See for instance the comments left by You Tube visitors: <http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=qCGwqR3SU1o> [accessed: 13 September 2011].

episodes, aimed at exemplifying Amin's violent and lubricious character. For instance, a scene features a man being force-fed with his own ear, while another depicts a woman stabbing herself to death, in a last-ditch attempt to escape Amin's lust. However, the horror that such unrestrained violence may provoke is largely offset by the many inadequacies of the production. The dialogues are rife with stereotypes ('you can kill me, General, but you cannot kill the spirit of the Ugandan people'); occasional disconnections between lip movements and voices suggest that a few actors may have been dubbed during post-production; and the overall quality of acting – especially Joseph Olita's histrionic interpretation of Amin – has been commended mostly for 'add[ing] to the trashy feel of the film'.[240] As a result, the general aspect of the production has been variously likened to 'a particularly sadistic television movie', the *Thunderbirds* TV series, or 'a demented comic book brought to life'.[241]

This combination of luridness and artlessness has led *Amin: The Rise and Fall* to be associated with the loose category of 'exploitation cinema'. As Thomas Doherty writes, exploitation is a category with historically shifting but overlapping meanings.[242] The term, which initially referred to advertising strategies, was used from the late 1940s to describe low-budget films shot by independent producers, who exploited sensational or taboo topics. Since the 1960s, 'exploitation' has acquired a looser meaning, with the apparition of subcategories relating to the specific subject that is being exploited, such as 'sexploitation', 'nazisploitation', 'blaxploitation', and so on. In the process, the term seems to have taken on a more aesthetic signification. Indeed, according to Eric Schaefer, the generally poor conditions of production of the 'classic exploitation film' (shabby sets, heavy reliance on stock footage, continuity errors, basic camerawork and editing, poor recording, etc.) have resulted

[240] David Brock, 'Amin: The Rise and Fall (1981)', *The Beardy Freak* <http://www.beardyfreak.com/rvamin.php> [accessed 13 September 2011].

[241] Jack; F. D., 'Amin, the Rise and Fall (1980)', *Time Out* <http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/77886/amin_the_rise_and_fall.html> [accessed 13 September 2011]; Donald Guarisco, 'The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin (1981)', *Rovi* <http://www.allrovi.com/movies/movie/the-rise-and-fall-of-idi-amin-v2084> [accessed 13 September 2011].

[242] Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 3.

in the emergence of a conscious cinematic style, in direct contrast to the codes of Hollywood pictures.[243]

Readings in terms of exploitation entail, once again, a number of assumptions concerning the relation between truthfulness, ethics and aesthetics. In recent decades, exploitation cinema has been the object of 'cult' or 'fan' phenomena and has received increasing attention from a highly sophisticated audience, often the same as avant-garde cinema.[244] This 'paracinematic audience', to use Jeffrey Sconce's term, has developed specific reading strategies, which consist in imagining the poor conditions of shooting and the (supposedly) unethical intentions of exploitation filmmakers. Exploitation fans thus adopt a decidedly ironic approach to representation by injecting intentionality where there might only be incompetence, and explicitly place themselves in opposition to the norms of legitimate culture. One of the main characteristics of this reading protocol is the destruction of any claim to diegetic 'truth'. The expectation raised by exploitation cinema is that events or phenomena, which may be real or not, will be represented in the most visual and titillating manner, and that truth claims will be made when they might serve the film's sensationalism, irrespective of whether what is shown is actually true or not. As Eric Schaefer argues, exploitation is a form of cinema in which truth and falsity, fiction and nonfiction, the real and the imaginary, are all subordinated to the unethical imperatives of 'spectacle'.[245] Consequently, the only truth acknowledged by exploitation fans is that of the film's own production. This is what Jeffrey Sconce, following the fanzine *Zontar*, calls 'badtruth', i.e. 'that moment when the narrative logic and diegetic illusions of cheap exploitation cinema disintegrate into a brutally blissful encounter with profilmic failure'.[246] Then, writes Sconce, 'The "surface"

[243] Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 5.

[244] This is one of the main points of Sconce's article '"Trashing" the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style', *Screen*, 36 (1995), 371-393. See also Joan Hawkins's comments on the coexistence of both types of films in catalogues of mail-order video companies. *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 3.

[245] Schaefer, p. 79.

[246] *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, ed. by Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 9.

diegesis becomes precisely that, the thin and final veil that is the indexical mark of a more interesting drama, that of the film's construction and sociohistorical context'.[247]

The influence of this approach can be detected in most accounts of *Rise and Fall*, which, as suggested by the reviews I quoted earlier (as well as my own summary), insist primarily on the 'profilmic failures' of the production. The disruption that this form of reading creates for the historical referentiality of the film is exemplified by the following commentary about the 'raid on Entebbe' sequence:

> If I didn't know about the Israeli commando raid, I would have had no idea that was what was going on – partly because it just sort of happens, and partly because the Israeli commandos look like they were outfitted in the Wal-Mart Halloween aisle.
>
> Part of the failure is in the budget. It's not easy to communicate the mass extermination of thousands when you have a cast of dozens. A really clever filmmaker could pull it off, but it doesn't happen here.[248]

In this case, cinematic incompetence thwarts the work of representation, allowing the viewer's attention to be diverted away from the content of the film towards the (imagined) scene of its production. The same reviewer also illustrates how readings in terms of exploitation entail a number of speculations on the unethical intentions of the filmmakers:

> Sharad Patel was sitting around one day, wondering what he could contribute to a world still reeling from wars and terrorism and hostage situations, from gas rationing and out of control inflation. It was the dawn of the 1980s, and in a world where a drastically escalating Cold War brought with it the promise of mutual assured destruction at almost any moment, thrusting us all into a dusty future in which we strut about in big shoulderpads and assless leather pants, what could one man do to contribute something positive, something that would give this world hope during such troubling times? What could one man produce, what could he make that would lift our spirits, make us cheer – maybe even make us believe again?
>
> If your answer to this profound question is, "He could make a sleazy exploitation pic about 1970s cannibal dictator Idi Amin!" then you, too, could be Sharad Patel![249]

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[247] Sconce, '"Trashing" the Academy', 371-393 (p. 391).

[248] Keith Allison, 'Amin: The Rise and Fall', *Teleportcity.com* <http://web.archive.org/web/20051218131907/http://teleport-city.com/movies/reviews/a-b/amin.html> [accessed 26 October 2010].

Yet a number of elements of *Amin: The Rise and Fall* do not entirely fit with a reading in terms of exploitation. For instance, a closer examination of the film reveals an unexpected degree of historical accuracy, starting with the cast, who present a baffling resemblance to the historical characters they play. Indeed, as noted by the review of the film in *The Times*, *Rise and Fall* appears like 'a series of *tableaux vivants*, with well cast lookalikes in the main roles'.[250] This attention to period details culminates in the episode devoted to the imprisonment and liberation of Denis Hills, a British journalist who had been imprisoned by Amin for calling him a 'village tyrant'. Hills agreed to play his own role in *Rise and Fall,* and the narrative is supplemented by the insertion of archive images, representing James Callaghan's visit to liberate him. More generally, the screenwriter, Wade Huie, seems to have made a close study of Henry Kyemba's *State of Blood*, and it turns out that most of the shocking images in the film are not pure inventions. Indeed, even though it obviously exploits common fantasies about African dictators, the freezer scene I described before is based on persistent and never firmly contradicted rumours. For instance, in a 1979 interview with Abraham Sule, a member of the State Research Bureau (Amin's militia), published in the South African magazine *Drum*, we read this testimony:

> ***Drum:*** There have been incredible stories of human heads stored in fridges in Amin's residence. How true is this?
>
> ***Sule:*** I have seen about five heads of people at Cape Town Villas. They were in a type of fridge. At one time we were told to go to the Cape Town Villas and remove the fridge because there was going to be a reception there for some foreign delegates. We were to move the fridge to an island which Amin used for a hideout. To be able to carry the fridge, we had to dismantle it, and this was when we saw the contents. The heads had fallen off their positions inside when the fridge was tilted so as to be carried out.[251]

This story also cropped up in Amin's obituaries in 2003, notably in the testimony of Brian Barron, the BBC's Africa Correspondent between 1977 and 1981. In Barron's

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[249] Allison.

[250] David Robinson, 'History as Weapon in Symbolic Struggle', *The Times* (London, 28 August 1981), p. 13.

[251] *Uganda: The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin: From the Pages of Drum*, ed. by Adam Seftel (Lanseria, South Africa: Bailey's African Photo Archives Production, 1994), p. 217.

recollections of his arrival in Kampala right after Amin's demise we find this passage:

> we headed for Amin's living quarters in Nile Mansions. The priority was to search the refrigerators because of persistent reports that he sometimes kept the heads of his victims in the freezer.
>
> With relief, we found no evidence to back this up.[252]

If this last sentence casts doubt on the veracity of these rumours, it nevertheless suggests how widespread and persistent they were, without completely invalidating them. Similar observations may be made regarding the second scene of cannibalism, which, far from being a lurid invention of the screenwriters, turns out to have been strongly inspired by Kyemba's book:

> On several occasions when I was Minister of Health, Amin insisted on being left alone with his victim's bodies. Such was the case when the acting Chief of Staff, Brigadier Charles Arube, was murdered in March 1974. Amin came to see the body while it was in the mortuary of Mulago Hospital; he ordered the deputy medical superintendent, Dr. Kyewalabaye, to "wait outside"; Amin then went in by himself for two or three minutes. There is of course no evidence for what he does in private, but it is universally believed in Uganda that he engages in blood rituals. Hardly any Ugandan doubts that Amin has, quite literally, a taste for blood. [...]
>
> I have reason to believe that Amin's practices do not stop at tasting blood: on several occasions he has boasted to me and others that he has eaten human flesh.[253]

In highlighting this, I do not want to downplay the film's opportunistic attitude. It is obvious from the examples mentioned above that far from seeking a balanced representation of Amin, the screenplay systematically favours the most shocking interpretation. In the last case, the filmmakers obviously made a deliberate choice to sensationalize the anecdote by representing directly what, as Kyemba reluctantly admits, remains a rumour. In addition, the historical value of the episode is of course not certain, since assessing it would require a minute examination of Kyemba's book. Rather than manifesting a pedagogical ambition or an ethical commitment to

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[252] Brian Barron, 'The Idi Amin I Knew', *BBC*, 16 August 2003, section Africa <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3156011.stm> [accessed 26 October 2010].

[253] Kyemba, pp. 108-109.

truth, following existing sources might simply have been a way to avoid spending too much time and money writing a screenplay, when so many sensational anecdotes were readily available and could be advertised as 'true stories'. But it is also possible that *Rise and Fall* was not initially intended to be only an 'exploitation' film. In some African countries, for instance, the film seems to have enjoyed a reception in which the category of 'exploitation' did not operate. In a 2005 Kenyan article, Patel was thus described as a brave and politically committed director: 'Patel, a young Kenyan film-maker was eager to expose Amin's murderous government and his brutal reign. Amin was in power in 1976 when Patel launched his movie plans, and he knew that making a movie on Amin then was risky'.[254] Another Kenyan journalist compared *Rise and Fall* favorably to *The Last King of Scotland*, and even described it as 'the best biographical account [of Amin] so far':

> *Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*, which observers say has been the best biographical account so far, was released only a year after the "butcher of Africa" was deposed from power. It recreates Amin's atrocities in graphic detail – eating human flesh, forcing children to view their dead mother, making love in a car [sic] to name but a few.[255]

It is also possible that at the time of its release, *Rise and Fall*'s engagement with history was taken more seriously. The film was rated X in the UK,[256] and *The New York Times* labelled it a 'suitably bloody exploitation film',[257] but David Robinson in the *Times* thought that it set out 'to be a straight neo-documentary record of the eight years of Amin's presidency', albeit a not so subtle one.[258] In the United Kingdom, the diffusion of the film coincided with the campaign against the 'video nasties' of the early 1980s, which in 1984 led the Thatcher government to institute a new system of censorship (Video Recording Act), banning videos that featured extreme violence. Even though *Rise and Fall* is sometimes featured in recent anthologies of the nasties,

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[254] Franklin Awori, 'No Easy Task', *Daily Nation*, 2005 <http://allafrica.com/stories/200511030569.html> [accessed 14 September 2011]. However, one probably needs to take such statements with a pinch of salt, as Kenyan reviewers have often extolled Patel's film in somewhat nationalist terms.

[255] John Koigi, 'Idi Amin the King of Scotland.', *Daily Nation* (Nairobi, 16 September 2006) <http://allafrica.com/stories/200609180095.html> [accessed 22 January 2011].

[256] Robinson, p. 13.

[257] Vincent Canby, 'Amin's Rise and Fall', *The New York Times*, 19 March 1982, section Movies <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/03/19/movies/amin-s-rise-and-fall.html> [accessed 5 June 2011].

[258] Robinson, p. 13.

it did not figure on the list of banned videos established by the Director of Public Prosecutions.[259] This may be explained by the fact that *Rise and Fall* is significantly less violent than some of the most famous 'nasties', but one may also conjecture that its historical subject matter appeared as a mitigating element.

Ultimately, speculations on the real intentions of the filmmakers are likely to remain fruitless. But what these potential variations in the film's reception suggest is that perceptions of referentiality and faithfulness depend primarily on audiences' conceptions of aesthetic value and generic conventions. Thus, the modalities of *Amin: The Rise and Fall*'s contemporary reception as an exploitation film has led to a neutralizing of its historical content, and the reasons why the film has usually not been regarded as historically credible are mostly based on its aesthetic aspects, and on the unethical intent that audiences have inferred from them. Contrary to what happened in the reception of *Général Idi Amin Dada* and *The Last King of Scotland*, the historical accuracy of *Rise and Fall* has been regarded as not only secondary, but in fact superfluous:

> I really doubt anyone renting a movie called *Amin: The Rise and Fall*, made by the man who would later executive produce *Bachelor Party*, and with a cover depicting an insane drawing of a screaming Idi Amin is picking the movie up thinking, "Hey, I might learn a thing or two about history from this!" Unless, that is, they are the same people who rent *A Knight's Tale* because they've "always wanted to learn more about those King Arthur times." [...] That there is any historical accuracy at all is nice, but it's hardly the reason this movie is around. Movies like this exist to parade around a big fat cannibal in a little bathrobe.[260]

Besides, although many reviews on fan websites do mention the film's relative accuracy, claiming that it might be somehow educational, it seems that the film's relative factualness did not influence the viewing experience itself. Indeed, the realization that the film's narrative can be backed up by existing accounts only intervened after watching it, and often as a surprise:

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[259] It is reviewed in the second volume Allan Bryce's catalogue dedicated to video nasties, and the video case appears briefly in the documentary *Ban the Sadist Videos*. See Allan Bryce, *Strike up the Banned: A Pictorial Guide to Movies That Bite!* (Liskeard: Stray Cat, 2001); *Ban the Sadist Videos!*, dir. by David Gregory (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2005).

[260] Allison.

> Beyond the blood, violence, and the occasional tit though, there's still some education to be had from watching something like this. Even after you filter out the urban legends a lot of this stuff, as bizarre as it may seem, actually did happen according to accounts seen from more credible sources.[261]

> Perhaps most shocking of all is that the dynamics on screen are more or less strictly in line with the various biographies written on Amin and Uganda through the turbulent 70's. Few liberties seem to have been taken by the film makers, perhaps it is just the film's sensationalist manner that suggests that the material is somewhat removed from reality.[262]

In both examples, the film's partial adherence to the historical record had to be proven either by 'accounts seen from more credible sources', or by 'various biographies' of Amin. The historical knowledge acquired by the viewers did not come from the film, but in spite of it. In the end, it seems that despite the desire of the paracinematic audience to escape the 'illusions' of filmic diegesis and to refuse to confuse reality with its representation, these viewers nonetheless operate a conflation between ethics, truth and aesthetics that is not so different from 'mainstream' modes of reception.

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What emerges from the analysis of these three filmic portrayals of Amin is the importance of aesthetic and generic conventions in our perception of a film's ability to tell the truth, but also the impossibility of using these aspects as a reliable criterion to assess the actual historical accuracy of a film. Perceptions of truth and referentiality seem to have been central to the way the political and ethical value of these films has been judged, but it is clear that these judgements were nonetheless deeply influenced by aesthetics. Thus, although the level of respectability of the three films under discussion seems to reflect their level of historical credibility (with documentary as the most legitimate form of representation), paradoxically, historical truth (or our limited knowledge of it) plays a very secondary role in the perception of

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[261] Anubis, 'The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin', *Tombofanubis.com* <http://www.tombofanubis.com/Reviews/A/RiseandFallofIdiAmin.html> [accessed 26 October 2010].

[262] Omar Khan, 'Amin The Rise and Fall', *The Hot Spot Online* <http://www.thehotspotonline.com/moviespot/holly/a/Amin.htm> [accessed 17 November 2010].

this credibility. This is not to say that aesthetics are necessarily manipulative: whereas reviewers of *The Last King of Scotland* have sometimes been misled by the conflation of truth and *vraisemblance*, in the case of *Général Idi Amin Dada*, Schroeder's manipulation of documentary conventions does not necessarily imply that his representation of Amin is inaccurate or unreliable. In highlighting this confusion, I am not trying to argue that these films should be judged according to their properly historical value, or on the contrary that it is illegitimate to examine them with such concerns in mind. Rather, my aim in this chapter has been to emphasize the complexity of the experience these works create, and the central role that these potential confusions play in it. In this process, the notion of historical truth comes to play a deeply ambiguous role, working at the same time as the ethical horizon of the films and as a source of aesthetic enjoyment.

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Achille Mbembe and the Disorder of Discourse

Since the publication of his landmark collection of essays *De la postcolonie* in 2000 (with a nearly simultaneous publication in English in 2001 under the title *On the Postcolony*), Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe has become one of the most influential analysts of the postcolonial predicament in Africa.[263] Initially trained in history and political science in Cameroon and in France, Mbembe made a large part of his early career in the United States, where he settled in the late 1980s. He then took the head of the Codesria (Conseil pour le développement de la recherche en sciences sociales en Afrique) in Dakar, from 1996 to 2000, before moving to South Africa, where he works today. This chapter will focus on what remains to date Mbembe's most famous article, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', which was first published in 1992. As Michael Karlstrom writes, this text 'has become a canonical contribution to the literature on postcolonial African politics, yet [...] has also proved difficult to digest and build upon'.[264]

The choice of this article is not only motivated by its influence on recent debates about postcolonial regimes and its centrality to the career of a prominent African intellectual, but also by the particular questions it raises concerning the relation between aesthetics, politics and knowledge. In previous chapters, the texts I have been discussing all belong to a sphere of cultural production, that of literary and cinematographic representations, which has been conventionally associated with the category of the 'aesthetic'. (Even in a case such as *Amin: The Rise and Fall*, the

[263] Achille Mbembe, *De la postcolonie: essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala, 2000); Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[264] Mikael Karlström, 'On the Aesthetics and Dialogics of Power in the Postcolony', *Africa*, 73 (2003), 57-76 (p. 57).

fact that it has been denied the status of a legitimate work of art still implies a judgement on its aesthetic value.) This, as we have seen, has had significant effects on the reception of these works as well as on the paradoxical forms of referentiality they have created. Mbembe's 'Provisional Notes on the Posctolony', by contrast, is not only a (presumably) non-fictional text, but also belong to a genre of writing, that of the academic article, which is not spontaneously or primarily identified with the realm of the aesthetic. The topic of the text, which deals with dictatorial regimes in post-colonial Africa, situates it broadly in the field of political science, in which issues of referential adequacy and truth conventionally prevail over formal concerns. Yet in the 'Notes' aesthetics play a crucial role. At the level of its explicit argument, Mbembe's analysis of postcolonial dictatorship concentrates on the 'aesthetics' of these regimes, thus pointing to the possibility of perceiving social and political objects aesthetically. In addition, as I will show in this chapter, the text of the 'Notes' itself gestures toward a form of writing which uses the contradictory and multidirectional character of the aesthetic experience in order to move beyond the current discourses and counter-discourses that define the postcolonial predicament of Africa. This raises an important issue, which will provide the central problematic of this chapter: can the aesthetic, in spite of the equivocations I described in the previous chapters, serve as the foundation for an alternative form of knowledge?

Mbembe's project emerges in response to a number of challenges facing the production of knowledge about Africa. Two of them are particularly relevant to my discussion. The first is the epistemological crisis of the social sciences that emerged from the late 1960s onward. The introduction of *De la postcolonie* offers a detailed analysis of the quandary in which these disciplines are placed, and makes a daunting inventory of the epistemological transformations they have undergone:

> l'éclatement de l'univers des sciences sociales et le recul du modèle newtonien qui servait de cadre de référence et de modèle, en dernière instance, de rationalité scientifique; la perte de crédibilité des "grands récits" (croyance en l'inéluctabilité du progrès rationnel, en le sujet individuel, en une vérité universelle); l'affirmation générale de *la multiplicité des mondes et des formes de vie* ; la reconnaissance de l'existence de savoirs distincts du savoir dit scientifique (cas des savoirs narratifs); la pluralité des formes d'invention de la

> différence et de l'universel; et la redéfinition des rapports entre objectivité et représentation.[265]

As Mbembe makes clear, his work seeks to take these changes into account, and it has indisputably been influenced by the various turns (linguistic, rhetorical, interpretive, narrative, etc.) taken by the social sciences.[266] However, as suggested by his rejection of 'postmodern nihilism', and his defiance towards 'extremist' positions that would deny the existence of any graspable reality beyond language and narrative, one of the aims of his reflexions is to negotiate, from within these shifts, a position where expressing some truth about Africa is still possible.[267]

Mbembe's work also emerges from the growing critique of the *Négritude* and Afrocentrist movements in Francophone Africa, following the disappointment generated by post-independence regimes. This movement is linked to the discussions surrounding the social sciences, in that it is partly through the appropriation of the methods of the social sciences (particularly of history, linguistics and ethnology) that Afrocentrist and nationalist theoreticians, such as Cheikh Anta Diop and Théophile Obenga, tried to prove that far from being uncivilized, Africa was actually the source of all civilization.[268] After independence, the rhetoric of this cultural rehabilitation became increasingly reified and instrumentalized by dictatorial regimes – as exemplified by Mobutu's politics of 'authenticity' or his invocation of patriarchy as an African tradition to justify his

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[265] Mbembe, *De la postcolonie*, p. 30.

[266] For a synthetic account of these different turns, see for instance Martin Kreiswirth, 'Trusting the Tale: The Narrativist Turn in the Human Sciences', *New Literary History*, 23 (1992), 629-657.

[267] Mbembe, *De la postcolonie*, pp. 29 and 28.

[268] The most famous example is of course Diop's momentous *Nations nègres et cultures* (1954), a work based on Diop's first doctoral thesis, realized under the direction of Marcel Griaule, and whose controversial argument was rejected by the Sorbonne in 1954. Diop sought to establish a scientific argument demonstrating that Egyptian civilization was in fact a black civilization, and that via the Egyptians, Africa had preceded and inspired Western civilizations: 'les Ethiopiens d'abord, les Egyptiens ensuite, selon le témoignage unanime de tous les Anciens, ont créé et porté à un degré extraordinaire de développement tous les éléments de la civilisation alors que les autres peuples – en particulier les Eurasiatiques – étaient plongés dans la barbarie'. Cheikh Anta Diop, *Nations nègres et culture* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1954), p. 405. Diop used these analyses to provide a cultural basis for the establishment of a continental federalism. See also Théophile Obenga, *La cuvette congolaise: les hommes et les structures, contribution à l'histoire traditionnelle de l'Afrique centrale* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976); *Le Zaïre: civilisations traditionnelles et culture moderne, archives culturelles d'Afrique centrale* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1977).

non-democratic regime.[269] In the 1970s, a number of critical works emerged, which blamed the perceived generalizations of the previous generation and its failure to break with the essentialism of colonial thought. Among the most influential of these works are *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Négritude ou servitude* (1971) by Marcien Towa; *Négritude et négrologues* (1972) by Stanislas Adotevi; *La crise du Muntu, Authenticité africaine et philosophie* by Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga (1977); *Sur "la philosophie africaine": une critique de l'ethnophilosophie* (1977) by Paulin Hountondji; and *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980) by Kwasi Wiredu. These works were discussed and extended by Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, perhaps the most famous thinker of this generation, who, in *The Invention of Africa* (1988), attempted a systematic dissection of the discourses on Africa, through the method of Foucauldian archaeology. According to Mudimbe, the contestation of Afrocentrism constituted a turn away from the subordination of intellectual reflexion to political goals, and a displacement of the interest of African thinkers towards the production of knowledge and truth:

> The preindependence generation of African intellectuals was mostly concerned with political power and strategies for ideological succession. Since 1960, and more visibly since the 1970s, a new generation prefers to put forward the notion of epistemological vigilance. This generation seems much more concerned with strategies for mastering intellectual paradigms about "the path to truth", with analysing the political dimensions of knowledge, and with procedures for establishing new rules in African studies.[270]

Mbembe's work follows the effort of this previous generation to diagnose and overcome what he has termed the 'cul-de-sac of the many discourses on Africa' – a situation that could be likened to the 'déjà-vu' I described in Chapter 1.[271] It is probably to describe this situation in which any writing about Africa is necessarily reacting to a certain form of epistemological violence that Mbembe often talks about 'une faille', a rift, as the origin of his own attempt.[272] The 'faille' not only

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[269] Jeanne M Haskin, *The Tragic State of the Congo: From Decolonization to Dictatorship* (New York: Algora, 2005), pp. 44-48. On this aspect, see also *Mobutu, roi du Zaïre*, dir. by Thierry Michel (Cinéart, 1999).

[270] V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 36.

[271] Achille Mbembe, 'On the Postcolony: A Brief Response to Critics', *African Identities*, 4 (2006), 143-178 (p. 156).

[272] Achille Mbembe, 'Ecrire l'Afrique à partir d'une faille', *Politique Africaine*, 1993, 69-97.

suggests that a direct engagement with Africa may have been made impossible by those discourses that have simultaneously constituted it as an object of discussion and failed (*failli*) to account for it. It also points toward an escape from that predicament: 'Ecrire l'Afrique à partir d'une faille' is reminiscent of the French phrase '*trouver la faille*', i.e. identifying the weakness of an opponent, or of an argument. Mbembe's attempt thus defines itself not only against the Western discourses that have traditionally constituted Africa as the irreducible 'Other', but also as a rupture with the refutations of these discourses, such as Afrocentrist or nationalist celebrations of 'authenticity' which, in their systematic opposition to the West, have remained trapped within its discursive procedures: 'any serious critique of the West entails, of necessity, a critical revisiting of our own fables and the various grammars which, under the pretext of authenticity or radicalism, prosaically turn Africa into yet another fiction'.[273]

The negative reference to 'fiction' in this quotation is worth noting: fiction is a recurring theme in Mbembe's thought, and it occupies an ambivalent position. On the one hand, Mbembe has often referred to 'fiction' in order to disparage the discourses he denounces, exposing on various occasions 'the realization of […] fictions and the fictionalization of the real' that is produced by postcolonial dictatorships, or the proclivity of colonialism to transform its own 'legends and fictions' into disciplines.[274] On the other hand, Mbembe has often celebrated religion and literature as two discourses whose fictions and fables can remedy the failures of existing conceptual idioms and escape, through the poetic imagination,

[273] Mbembe, 'A Brief Response to Critics', 143-178 (p. 156). On these aspects, see also the Introduction of *De la postcolonie*, 30-32, and Mbembe's virulent denunciation of Marxist nationalism and nativism in 'A propos des écritures africaines de soi', *Politique Africaine*, 77 (2000), 16-43.

[274] Achille Mbembe, 'Prosaics of Servitude and Authoritarian Civilities', *Public Culture*, 5 (1992), 123-145 (p. 143); Achille Mbembe, 'Notes sur le pouvoir du faux: L'Afrique des africanistes', *Le Débat*, 118 (2002), 49-58 (p. 50). As I will discuss later, this negative use of 'fiction' and 'fable' can be opposed to the way this term has been embraced by other thinkers, in reaction to the positivist claims of the social sciences. In the preface of Mudimbe's book *Parables and Fables*, one can for instance read: 'The title of this book means what it spells out. The concepts of parable and fable should be understood in their very ordinary meanings. My own text might only be a parable or a fable about other fables. In effect, a fable is a fictitious story that claims to teach a lesson and a parable is also a story that pretends to illustrate a normative lesson'. V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. xxi.

the epistemological strictures that weigh on the social sciences.[275] Mbembe has notably acknowledged the profound influence of the Francophone African novel on his own understanding of postcolonial dictatorships in Africa:

> From the late 1980s onwards, while many analysts were locked in sterile debates about the prospects of Africa's development, the Francophone African novel was already celebrating the demise of the nationalist project and of Africa's post-independent states' claim to stand for the 'Father'. At the same time, the novel was alerting us to the apparition on the horizon of new, uncommon forces that we did not quite yet grasp and that could not quite be said in the then dominant conceptual languages.[276]

However, Mbembe's celebration of the African novel as visionary medium and repository of a new language, beyond the conceptual impasses of developmentalism and nationalism, does not address the issue of the fictionality of the genre, or the relation between this fictionality and that of the 'fictions' he so often denounces.

This ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that his own project is marked by a contestation of the disciplinary boundaries that have produced the distinction between fiction and the social sciences, and between the realm of the aesthetic and that of the conceptual. Indeed, Mbembe's attempt to lift the burden of previous discourses consists in large part in elaborating a new form of writing, which would be capable of transcending the 'limits of epistemological imagination':[277]

> Face au caractère absurde de la plupart des discours sur le continent, il me semblait qu'une manière de sortir du carcan était d'expérimenter avec la langue, et d'abord de tenter de la dynamiter. […]
>
> J'étais à la recherche d'une écriture qui conduise le lecteur à la rencontre de ses propres sens. Mais ces rencontres, elles ne m'intéressent qu'en ce qu'elles sont fragmentaires, évanescentes, hachées, quelques fois ratées. Il s'agit de rencontres avec des zones

[275] Religion and literature are in fact closely linked in Mbembe's thought. In 'Ecrire l'Afrique à partir d'une faille', Mbembe explains for instance how he developed an interest in 'metaphorical truth' after reading Gustavo Guttiérez's *Theology of Liberation*: 'Soudain, je ne devins pas "mystique", mais pour une fois, j'étais prêt à explorer, sans préjugé négatif, le problème de la vérité métaphorique et de ce que l'on pourrait appeler la "compréhension narrative". J'étais prêt à m'interroger sur les conditions de validité d'un "sens absolu" quitte à prendre le détour de la légende, de la fable et du songe, et pourvu que ce détour débouchât sur une productivité politique'. Mbembe, 'Ecrire l'Afrique à partir d'une faille', 69-97 (p. 77).

[276] Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Achille Mbembe in Conversation with Isabel Hofmeyr', *South African Historical Journal*, 56 (2006), 177-187 (p. 178).

[277] Mbembe, 'A Brief Response to Critics', 143-178 (p. 148).

> surchargées de la mémoire et du présent africains et des régions de la connaissance qui ne se ramènent pas aux sciences sociales classiques: la philosophie, les arts, la musique, la religion, la littérature, la psychanalyse.[278]

This emphasis on the reader's sensual experience, and the attention given to its formal qualities, which are echoed stylistically in the passage itself (especially through the rhythm of the accumulation 'fragmentaires, évanescentes, hachées, quelques fois ratées'), suggests that Mbembe's project is also in large part an aesthetic one. This aspect was forcefully reaffirmed by Mbembe in a recent discussion with Jean Comaroff, in which he insisted on the indissoluble link between aesthetics and politics in his thought:

> So what I'm saying is that multiple languages have to be brought to bear on the task of bringing Africa back to life in contemporary theorizing — awakening these sleeping bodies, in a kind of linguistic epiphany that would incite us to start asking different questions or even old ones anew, hearing something different, speaking in tongues, if you wish. Or in any case, in a language we never imagined we could ever practice. So I am calling for a kind of glossolalia — by which I do not simply mean a matter of stylistics, but a new, radical form of criticism that is required by the mere fact of our sharing this world; a world that is, as a matter of fact, a multiplicity of worlds and of interlaced boundaries. I have said that, for me, this is a political project. It's also an aesthetic project, because politics without aesthetics leads nowhere.[279]

Mbembe's eagerness to point out that his commitment to aesthetics is not merely 'a matter of stylistics' suggests that the poetic aspect of his work does not simply accompany or ornate his arguments but is central to them. Furthermore, the Pentecostal references to 'linguistic epiphany', 'speaking in tongues' and 'glossolalia' gesture toward mystical experiences, in which it is the sudden capacity of the preacher to speak a heretofore unknown or unlearned language ('a language we never imagined we could ever practice') that is the guarantee that what he is saying is a divine revelation (and therefore true), rather than the content of what is being said – which, in the case of an unknown language, may not be immediately intelligible. In likening his own use of aesthetics to these charismatic

[278] Achille Mbembe, 'Avant-propos à la seconde édition', in *De la postcolonie: essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*, 2nd edn (Paris: Karthala, 2005), pp. I-XXXII (p. XVII).

[279] Jesse Weaver Shipley, 'Africa in Theory: A Conversation Between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 83 (2010), 653-678 (p. 661).

experiences, Mbembe suggests that his ambition is to create a form of knowledge in which the invention of a new writing, the capacity of speaking together multiple theoretical languages, would act as a new source of truth. This is further underlined by the metaphorical echoes of the theme of resurrection ('bringing Africa back to life'; 'awakening these sleeping bodies'), which suggest that Mbembe is claiming for his writing a kind of immediate performativity. As the following pages will examine, this contestation and reconfiguration of disciplinary boundaries, as well as the ambiguous role played by fiction in Mbembe's argument, raise important issues for the interpretation of his project.

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Before we turn to the discussion of the 'Notes', a brief methodological point is in order. In tune with the international dimension of Mbembe's career, there are several different versions of the text: initially written in French in 1989 to be presented at a meeting of the African Studies Association in Atlanta, it was first rewritten and translated into English in 1992, in order to be published by the journal of the African Institute, *Africa*, under the title 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony'.[280] A long extract of the text was also published in the Spring 1992 issue of *Public Culture*, under the title 'The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony',[281] and a large part of the next issue of the journal was devoted to the reception of this abridged text, with a wide range of reactions from prestigious contributors.[282] In 1995, a fourth version entitled 'Notes provisoires sur la postcolonie' was published in French by the journal *Politique Africaine*,[283] and a slightly revised version of this text later became the central

[280] Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 62 (1992), 3-37.

[281] Achille Mbembe, 'The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony', *Public Culture*, trans. by Janet Roitman, 4 (1992), 1-30.

[282] *Public Culture* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1992). Contributors included: Tejumola Olaniyan, David William Cohen, V.Y. Mudimbe, Michael Taussig, Judith Butler, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, John Pemberton, Fernando Coronil, Dain Borges and Michèle Richman.

[283] Achille Mbembe, 'Notes provisoires sur la postcolonie', *Politique Africaine*, 60 (1995), 76-109. References to this article will be indicated in the main text.

chapter of *De la postcolonie*, under the title 'Esthétique de la vulgarité'.[284] Similarly, the English version of the book, *On the Postcolony*, reproduces the article published in 1992 in *Africa*. These numerous translated and revised versions exhibit a number of differences, sometimes quite significant, although these have usually been ignored. Choosing which version to study is made all the more difficult if we consider that although the paper was initially conceived and written in French, it is nonetheless its English version that stirred the most significant debates.[285] Since my analysis of the text will pay attention not only to the ideas expressed in the article, but also to its writing and construction, I will generally privilege the version that was written by Mbembe himself, i.e. the French one of 1995 (the differences between this one and the 2000 adaptation of *De la Postcolonie* are marginal). However, acknowledging the elusive nature of the 'Notes' is indispensible, as its many commentators are not all talking exactly about the same text, and I will therefore highlight divergences between versions each time this seems relevant.

The 'Notes' explore the exercise of power in Africa and focus more precisely on the daily relations of subjection and indiscipline that link the state and its subjects. Building upon a vast number of theoretical references including the Bakhtinian concept of carnival, the method of Foucauldian archaeology and the work of Comi Toubalor on 'political derision' in Togo, Mbembe argues that in the postcolony, the exercise of power, or 'commandement', is marked by a carnivalesque aesthetics of obscenity and vulgarity, which leads him to contest Bakhtin's notion that vulgarity is mostly a characteristic of 'non-official' cultures.[286] A central aspect of the obscenity of postcolonial regimes lies in their extravagance: to command, Mbembe writes, means 'éprouver publiquement un certain contentement à bien manger et à bien boire; et, comme l'affirme S. Labou Tansi, "pisser le gras et la rouille dans les

[284] Mbembe, *De la postcolonie*, pp. 139-186.

[285] For Mbembe's stringent analysis of the difference between the Anglo-American and French receptions, see Mbembe, 'A Brief Response to Critics', 143-178 (pp. 143-146).

[286] 'Commandement' is defined as follows: 'J'utilise le terme "commandement" dans son acception coloniale, c'est-à-dire en tant qu'il englobe: les structures de pouvoir et de coercition, les instruments et les agents de leur mise en œuvre, un style de rapport entre ceux qui émettent des ordres et ceux qui sont supposés obéir, sans naturellement les discuter. La notion de "commandement" renvoie donc, ici, à la modalité autoritaire par excellence' (78n8). Conversely, those who are ruled by this 'commandement' are referred to as 'cibles'.

fesses des fillettes"' (85). Thus, Mbembe details a number of 'signs', such as the use of lavish celebrations, the 'obesity' of the powerful (and 'le flot d'excréments qui en sont la contrepartie' (82)), or the uncontrolled licentiousness of government officials. The exuberant character of the postcolonial universe is reflected in Mbembe's highly figurative prose, in which the excesses and complexities of the postcolony are suggested through dense metaphorical networks, imagery centred on bodily functions, and a vertiginous accumulation of theoretical references and footnotes. The result is a disturbing and powerful description of a chaotic universe ruled by the unbridled 'jouissance' and 'vices' of those in power (102).

This postcolonial mode of domination simultaneously produces proliferating forms of life (Mbembe mentions for instance that 'les souverains libidineux de la postcolonie ont peuplé leurs contrées d'un nombre inconnu d'enfants naturels' (103)) and horrifying kinds of torture and death. Indeed, in Mbembe's account the defining characteristic of the postcolony is the multiple ways in which the bodies of the dominated are constantly used and abused by power. Postcolonized subjects can alternatively be forced to celebrate the ruler through dances and songs, or violently annihilated by measures of repression, which Mbembe describes as a means for the 'commandment' to 'inscribe the dazzle of its signs and pleasures into the memory of its subjects' ('inscrire dans la mémoire de ses "cibles" l'éclat de ses signes et de ses plaisirs') (90). According to Mbembe, this use of bodies by the postcolonial state differs from the violence of colonial governmentality, in that the colonial instrumentalization of bodies, despite its excess and arbitrariness, was usually justified in economic terms, as a means to increase the obedience and therefore the productivity of the colonized subject. For Mbembe, the aim of postcolonial commandment is not to make the bodies of its subjects more productive, but rather to recruit them for the performance of its own power.[287] For Mbembe, the postcolonial state seeks to involve its subject in its constant *mise-en-scène*, in order to ratify its own fictions and fables: 'la polité postcoloniale n'est capable de produire des "fables", d'étourdir ses "cibles" et d'inventer le délire qu'à partir du moment où le discours du pouvoir et les formes de sa mise en scène font

[287] Although, if one thinks for instance of the horrifying severing of hands that took place in the Congo under Leopold's rule, one may wonder if this rationalization in terms of 'productivity' is an accurate characterization of colonial 'governmentality'.

pénétrer ses cibles jusque dans les territoires du fantastique et de l'hallucination' (93).

This desire of the state to impose its own meanings and representations in the deepest recesses of its subjects' bodies and minds is described by Mbembe through the notion of the fetish. The fetish, according to Mbembe, is first of all a magical object which imposes a number of meanings as true and incontestable:

> L'argument de base de cette étude est qu'en postcolonie, le "commandement" entend s'instituer sur le mode d'un *fétiche*. Les signes, les langages et les récits qu'il produit ne sont pas seulement destinés à devenir des objets de représentation. Ils prétendent être investis d'un surplus de sens qu'il n'est pas permis de discuter, et dont on est interdit de se démarquer. (78)

In addition, Mbembe adds a few pages later that the fetish 'est, entre autres, un objet qui aspire à la sacralisation, qui réclame la puissance et qui cherche à entretenir une relation intime et de proximité avec ceux qui le portent' (86). Thus, Mbembe describes the portraits of Paul Biya in Cameroon, which are present not only in offices, airports, or torture chambers, but also on items of interior decoration or on women's clothes, as an attempt on the part of the state to invade even the most intimate sphere of its subjects' experience (97).

But this strategy on the part of the state finds its limits in its own chaos, and in the 'indiscipline' of the governed. According to Mbembe, the instability of the postcolony inevitably thwarts any attempt to impose on it a single meaning and enables the postcolonized subject to mobilize fluctuating and mobile subject-positions (83). For instance, the dominated are able to create spaces of insubordination in the very ceremonials through which the ruler seeks to ratify his domination. Paying particular attention to the ways the official rhetoric of dictatorial power is parodied and deformed, sometimes inadvertently, through jokes, puns or misunderstandings, Mbembe suggests that the dominated are able to perform subversive reinterpretations of the state's rhetoric, in which the mouth, the belly and the phallus are the main points of reference (81). This is illustrated by the various examples Mbembe borrows from Comi Toubalor, according to whom, under Eyadema, the Togolese 'chantaient, en sous-main, la brusque érection du "gros" et "intordable" phallus présidentiel', or suggested an echo between the

party's acronym 'RPT' and the sound of faecal matter falling into a sceptic tank (80). These verbal operations, Mbembe contends, perform a desecration of the fetish through parody and obscenity, and force the commandment to contemplate its own triviality.

But this conception of indiscipline, which is inspired by various theories of informal politics (especially Michel de Certeau's *arts de faire*) fails to constitute a real opposition to power. According to Mbembe, the dominated's own obscene imagery ends up reinforcing that of the dictatorial state and remains, in fact, trapped within the same aesthetic of vulgarity. The 'Notes' thus describe the relations between postcolonial power and its subjects as a form of 'promiscuity' or 'conviviality':

> Les réseaux d'images et les idiomes évoqués plus haut y sont partagés aussi bien par ceux que l'on désigne les dominants que par les "dominés". Le peuple qui rit sur la place publique ou sous cape, dans les "maquis" de la vie privée n'est donc pas forcément en train de "rabaisser" le pouvoir, de le "tourner en dérision" ou de "résister". […]
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> En effet, dans son désir d'apparat, le monde populaire peut emprunter des formalités ou des langages qui reproduisent et amplifient l'obscénité et les excès officiels. En contrepartie, le monde officiel peut mimer la vulgarité populaire au cœur même des procédures par lesquelles il prétend s'élever à la majesté. (85)

This ultimately blurs the analytical boundaries between collaboration and resistance, which Mbembe deems inadequate to the task of apprehending the postcolony.[288] For Mbembe, the subjects of postcolonial power and their dictators are united within the same aesthetics, and the dominated ridicule the dictator in the very same movement that they ratify the forms and symbols of his self-representation. This leads to a form of reciprocal paralysis, which Mbembe calls 'impouvoir' or 'zombification':

[288] This destabilisation of the domination/resistance binary is of course a recurrent theme in postcolonial theory. However, if the publication of the 'Notes' coincides with the institutionalization of postcolonial studies in the Anglophone academic world, its relation to the mainstream of the movement remains implicit. The 'Notes' contain no references to the then recent works of Spivak and Bhabha – in spite of the apparent proximity between Mbembe's argument and Bhabha's concern for paradoxical forms of agency. Comparably, Edward Said, whose use of Foucault in *Orientalism* anticipates Mbembe's recourse to Foucault's genealogical method, is totally absent from the abundant footnotes of the text.

> C'est précisément cette logique de la familiarité et de la domesticité qui a, pour conséquence inattendue, pas forcément la résistance, l'accommodation, le "désengagement", le refus d'être capturé ou l'antagonisme entre les faits et gestes publics et les autres "sous maquis", mais la "zombification" mutuelle des dominants et de ceux qu'ils sont supposés dominer. C'est elle qui les conduit à se "déforcer" réciproquement et à se bloquer dans la connivence, c'est-à-dire dans l'*impouvoir*. (78-79)

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This representation of the relations between the postcolonial state and its subjects raises a number of issues. Indeed, although they may share a common 'aesthetics', it could be argued that the verbal 'acts' of the people and the physical violence of dictatorial power do not operate on exactly the same level (especially as the dominated are deprived of the kind of authority that would transform their words into actions). The failure of verbal resistance to constitute a real danger for the dictator may be predetermined by factors other than aesthetic convivality. This point was made by Tejumola Olaniyan, among others, who argued that Mbembe's discarding of the dominant/dominated alternative in favour of a 'horizontal relationship of equality in powerlessness' obfuscates real inequalities of power:

> Mbembe shows how both groups are equally capable of dismembering each other, and he sees no difference or incommensurability between the ruled's *rhetorical* dismemberment of the autocrat and the autocrat's "reciprocal" *corporeal* dismemberment of the ruled in torture chambers and public execution grounds.[289]

As Olanyian complains, this apparent incommensurability is not addressed at a conceptual level within the text. However, it is skilfully smoothed over by Mbembe's writing, through a series of metaphorical conversions between speeches and acts. For instance, 'le rire ou l'indifférence populaire' are described as not only blasphematory, but also as a 'dévoration' of power. This is established by a succession of metaphors in which people's puns are implicitly likened to the notions of dislocation and dismembering: 'Ils [les gens du commun] *déboîtent* les

[289] Tejumola Olaniyan, 'Narrativizing Postcoloniality: Responsibilities', *Public Culture*, 5 (1992), 47-55 (pp. 53-54). On this topic of Mbembe's agonistic representation of political relations, see also Tshikala K. Biaya, 'Dérive épistémologique et écritude de l'histoire de l'Afrique contemporaine', *Politique Africaine*, 1995, 110-116 (p. 113).

contraintes du sens officiel et, par le fait même, *démembrent* parfois à leur propre insu, les dieux que tendent à être les autocrates africains' (my emphasis, 87). The equivalence between this metaphorical 'dévoration'/ 'démembrement' and the very concrete physical abuse inflicted by postcolonial authorities appears clearly in the following sentence: 'Or, si les gens du commun peuvent – même par inadvertance – démembrer les dieux qu'aspirent à être les autocrates africains et les "dévorer", *la réciproque* est vraie, ainsi que l'atteste ce récit de l'exécution publique de deux malfaiteurs au Cameroun…' (my emphasis, 87). In spite of the quotation marks around 'dévorer' (which provide a last-minute reminder that the word is used figuratively), the sentence establishes a striking 'reciprocity' between, on the one hand, the symbolic violence of the governed against the symbolical body of the ruler and, on the other hand, the physical violence of the postcolonial state against the material bodies of the ruled. This is reiterated a few pages later when Mbembe describes the ceremonial order of the postcolony and writes: 'il libère un espace de plaisir dans la façon même dont il produit la mort: d'où ces applaudissements frénétiques qui, *au même titre que* les balles, étouffent les cris des condamnés' (my emphasis, 91). Again, in placing the applause of the crowd on the same level as the bullets of the executioners, Mbembe fuses together two very different forms of violence by playing on the polysemy of 'étouffer', which can mean both 'smothering' and 'muffling'. In other words, the equivalence between the dominated's ambiguous forms of resistance and the state's physical violence is not argued at a conceptual level but performed rhetorically by the text.

A series of comparable displacements between what could be regarded as the conceptual and aesthetic levels of the text can be observed in Mbembe's construction of his object of inquiry, the 'postcolony'. In the second paragraph, Mbembe provides the following definition:

> Quant à la notion de 'postcolonie', elle renvoie, simplement, à l'identité propre d'une trajectoire historique donnée: celle de sociétés récemment sorties de l'expérience que fut la colonisation, celle-ci devant être considérée comme une relation de violence par excellence. (76)

It is significant that the postcolony is defined historically and politically but not in spatial terms, as an age rather than a place. In the French version, this spatial

indeterminacy is confirmed by the first words of the epigraph, taken from one of Sony Labou Tansi's novels, *L'Anté-peuple*: '... l'Afrique, cette grosse merde où tout le monde refuse sa place'.[290] The idea of 'refusing one's place' is emblematic of the elusiveness that characterizes both the location of the postcolony, and the epistemological position of the text. First, Mbembe tells us that Cameroon is going to serve as the main 'point d'appui' of the discussion. This, as Ato Quayson points out, is problematic: 'how does Cameroon come to occupy this discursive position of articulating in and of itself the whole reality of the African anguish?'[291] This choice could be taken to mean that all African countries are somehow interchangeable and that one can be used as a metonymy for the whole continent. But in reality, even the status of Cameroon as privileged example is not so clear. The English version of *On the Postcolony* reads 'the focus of my analysis is Cameroon', but the initial idea of 'point d'appui' in French is far less precise, and actually difficult to translate, suggesting a somewhat looser link between the example and the general argument, in which Cameroon is simply used to support the discussion, to facilitate it, but is not really its object. As a matter of fact, it is only the second half of the text that focuses on Cameroon, whereas in the first part, the examples also come from Togo and Kenya.

The article is thus constantly hesitating between the generality of the unspecified postcolony and series of concrete, punctual, sometimes even anecdotal examples, which are supposed to authenticate Mbembe's description. For instance, the sweeping generalization that 'En postcolonie, le pouvoir de punir […] n'a pas pour objectif primordial de fabriquer des individus utiles ou d'accroître leur efficacité productive' is only illustrated by one newspaper article from Kenya (88). This issue was raised by many critics. In a review of *On the Postcolony*, Ato Quayson remarked: 'The first thing to note in this regard is the degree to which the discussion of Africa has to oscillate between vast generalizations about politics and social forms on the continent and specific case studies grounding these

[290] The suspension marks are from Mbembé's quotation. This epigraph is absent from the English version published in 1992.

[291] Ato Quayson, 'Breaches in the Commonplace', *African Studies Review*, 44 (2001), 151-165 (p. 161).

generalizations'.[292] In a comment on the English translation of the 'Notes' in *Public Culture*, Fernando Coronil expressed similar misgivings: 'The unconstrained flight from fragmentary examples to vast generalizations about the postcolony hinders the understanding of commonalities among postcolonial societies as well as of differences distinguishing them', while another critic noted about *On the Postcolony* that '[t]he ambitious absence of specificity is at the same time the work's greatest flaw and its best quality'.[293]

In fact, the constitution of the postcolony as an object of reflexion relies on a series of generalizations, extrapolations, and disproportions, as if the choice of examples was more determined by their graphic or narrative power than by concerns for representativity or scientific credibility. A particularly disturbing and illustrative example of this dynamic can be found in the English version of the text, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', which contains a long quotation relating a case of sexual abuse by a primary school teacher:

> The incident took place in the second term of the school year 1989-1990. [Jean-Marie Effa had told the girl] to go and wait for him at the school toilets, which the child had done without question (everyone knows the control teachers have over children at that age). When he got there, the master undressed, put his trousers and pants to one side and his penis in her mouth. After a few moments he ejaculated. The child said that a white fluid came out. The girl spat it out and made herself vomit. [294]

Surprisingly, the origin of this quotation is never mentioned. The passage, which is presented as an example of the licentious excesses that pervade the postcolony is simply introduced in this way: 'an example is the story of Mr Jean-Marie Effa, a master in the primary school at Biyem-Assi who was convicted of having regularly had intercourse with the young girls in his class', with no footnote or reference, and no further clarification concerning the nature of the 'story' that is being quoted

[292] Quayson, 151-165 (p. 160).

[293] Fernando Coronil, 'Can Postcoloniality Be Decolonized? Imperial Banality and Postcolonial Power', *Public Culture*, 5 (1992), 89-108 (p. 96); Jacques Pouchepadass, 'Reviews of *On the Postcolony*', *South African Historical Journal*, 56 (2006), 188-200 (p. 96).

[294] Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', 3-37 (p. 24).

(legal deposition? Journalistic account? Fiction?)[295] It seems that it is actually through its crude and shocking character that the example is supposed to impress itself upon the reader, rather than as a piece of documentary evidence. This impression is reinforced if one pays closer attention to the sentence just before the quotation:

> In the postcolony diverse forms of *cuissage* and rights pertaining to them, the concern to reproduce and the overabundant life of the flesh complement one another, even if the ecstasy of the organs, the excesses of fine food and drink so characteristic of such an economy of pleasure are an integral part of a larger world – the world of Sade.[296]

In representing the postcolony as being part of 'a larger world', which is 'the world of Sade', this sentence suggests not only that the postcolony oscillates between the general and the singular, but that the aesthetic continuities Mbembe traces between different spheres of experience also cross the boundary between reality and fiction.

This is confirmed by another surprising series of examples, which are found throughout the text: the fictional countries depicted in Sony Labou Tansi's novels, especially *La Vie et demie*, *Les Yeux du volcan* and *L'Anté-peuple*. There are no fewer than nine references to Sony Labou Tansi's novels in the French article of 1995, including one epigraph, two long extracts, one footnote, and five quotations inserted in the main text. The number of these quotations varies slightly from one version to the next, but their abundance remains in all versions.[297] This presence becomes even more intriguing if one considers the different functions Sony's writings are made to perform in the text. Before the first quotation of his work, Sony Labou Tansi is duly introduced as a 'romancier congolais', and his writing is used to show that a point Mbembe made about Togo – that the verbal and written acts of the dominated display an obsession with orifices, odours and genitals – goes for other African countries too:

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[295] The anecdote is absent from the French version. In the republication of the article in *On the Postcolony* it was added that the story was 'reported in the Cameroon Tribune', but no date or page was provided. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 127.

[296] Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', 3-37 (pp. 23-24).

[297] Two of the quotations from Sony Labou Tansi are absent from the 1992 English version of *Africa*, but the translation includes one quotation which is not present in the French version. In total, I have found eight quotations from Sony Labou Tansi in the English text.

> L'obsession des orifices, des odeurs et des organes génitaux dominait donc les configurations togolaises du rire populaire. Encore qu'elle n'était pas absente des actes verbaux ou écrits de dominés d'autres pays d'Afrique noire. A titre d'exemple, et à la même époque, le romancier congolais S. Labou Tansi n'avait de cesse de décrire 'les hanches fournies, puissantes, délivrantes' et 'le cul essentiel et envoûtant des filles'… (81)

Here, Mbembe is apparently quoting Sony Labou Tansi as a representative of the dominated (as debatable as this might be) and treats his novel as a historical source.[298] But already in the second quotation, things become more blurry. This time, Sony Labou Tansi's text is inserted in the most casual manner, without reference to its literary origin, as if it were a prolongation of Mbembe's sentence:

> Aussi doit-il [le commandement], en outre, fournir la preuve publique de son prestige et de sa gloire par une représentation somptueuse et onéreuse des symboles de son statut, une exhibition du luxe dans les domaines de l'habillement et du train de vie, et une théâtralisation conséquente de ses actes de prodigalité. Ainsi encore, doit-il procéder essentiellement par prélèvements et extorsions (impôts, conscriptions diverses, redevances de tous genres, confiscations violentes, ponctions…). Dit S. Labou Tansi, les forces spéciales
>
> "venaient pour ramasser les impôts deux fois par an, ils demandaient l'impôt du corps, l'impôt de la terre, l'impôt des enfants, l'impôt de la fidélité au Guide, l'impôt pour l'effort de le relance économique, l'impôt des voyages, l'impôt de patriotisme, la taxe de militant, la taxe pour la lutte contre l'ignorance, la taxe de conservation des sols, la taxe de chasse" (84-85)

The literary quotation is no longer used as an example of how postcolonial regimes have been represented, but as a direct account of how postcolonial rulers actually operate. This permeability between fiction and non-fiction may seem all the more surprising given that the novel quoted here, *La Vie et demie*, is a text which deliberately eschews the conventions of realism and is strongly inspired by magical realism and science fiction.[299]

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[298] This is reinforced in the English version of the text by the fact that at this point, the translation talks about Labou Tansi as an 'author' and not a 'novelist'.

[299] On the relation of the text to these different genres, see for instance Lydie Moudileno's chapter 'Sortir de la "tropicalité": la compétition des imaginaires dans *La Vie et demie* de Sony Labou Tansi' in *Parades postcoloniales*, pp. 57-79.

This proximity between Mbembe's text and Sony Labou Tansi's intensifies as the text progresses.[300] Gradually, the latter's intrusions are indicated less and less clearly: references to the novelist's works start appearing in the footnotes rather than in the main text, and after a while, he is only referred to as 'le romancier', with no footnotes or explicit references to his name or his novels, as is the case for the sentence between quotations marks below:

> Ces corps peuvent tout aussi bien être simplement abandonnés à eux-mêmes, recrutés, comme le dit le romancier, "par la bière, les vins, les danses, le tabac, l'amour pissé comme on crache, les boissons obscures, les sectes, la palabre – tout ce qui peut empêcher d'être la mauvaise conscience des Excellences". (90)

Simultaneously, Mbembe starts using increasingly small fragments, which he patches within his own sentences, and which are subjected to reconfigurations that sometimes ignore the logic and context of Sony Labou Tansi's original text. For instance, Mbembe uses a series of small quotations from *La Vie et demie* to describe the licentiousness of bureaucrats, soldiers and officials in the postcolony: 'Il faudrait y ajouter les ministres qui découvrent les vierges sur les lits d'hôtels, les prêtres qui viennent culbuter "les culs croupissants" des jeunes filles, et leur creusant "un délicieux vide dans le ventre", leur font "crier le ho-hi-hi-hi final"' (102). The phrases in between the double quotation marks are borrowed from *La Vie et demie*, but this provenance is not indicated in the article. Furthermore, they are taken from a very different context: in the novel, they are used in reference to a priest named 'Monsieur l'Abbé', but far from being an account of the character's dissoluteness, the passage relates his unsuccessful attempt to resist his desire for one of the main (adult) female characters, Chaïdana.[301] Gradually, Mbembe's use of Sony Labou Tansi seems to evolve toward an ambiguous form of appropriation, in which Mbembe privileges the stylistic echoes between Sony's writing and his own text without paying attention to the original context of the novels. The quotations of Sony Labou Tansi thus seem to be used to convey a form of knowledge about the postcolony which is apparently indissociable from the novelist's phrasing, but simultaneously independent from Sony's original meaning.

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[300] It should be noted that throughout the English version the references to Sony Labou Tansi are indicated more clearly.

[301] See Sony Labou Tansi, *La Vie et demie* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), pp. 115-118.

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Mbembe's text has been widely criticized for these epistemological ambiguities, both in its initial reception and in its later republication as part of *De la postcolonie*. For instance, in his critical account of *On the Postcolony*, Jeremy Weate described Mbembe's reflexion as 'a hybrid amalgam of poststructuralist semiotics and existential phenomenology' and argued that it is so full of epistemological equivocations that it becomes impossible to discern 'a clearly defined theoretical position, backed up by any semblance of conceptual systematicity'.[302] The literary intrusions of Sony Labou Tansi could be understood as an instance of this apparent confusion, as suggested by the anthropologist Fernando Coronil, who commented on Mbembe's 'Notes' in *Public Culture*:

> Novels are invoked to lend support to Mbembe's view of the postcolony, without respect for the difference between literary and social-science representational conventions and their related, but different, truth claims. Texts seem to float as transparent representations or sources of truth, not as elements in a wider discourse of power involving other participants.[303]

Although Coronil raises an important point in underlining the different 'truth claims' and 'representational conventions' that define literature and the social sciences, the very anti-realism of Sony Labou Tansi's writing should make it hard to believe that fiction and reality could merely have been confused by Mbembe – just as in the argument I quoted earlier, Olanyian's suggestions that Mbembe simply 'sees no difference or incommensurability' between symbolic and physical violence sounds rather implausible. Mbembe's own response to Coronil's critique suggests as much: 'I am reproached for not having made the distinction between the novel as fiction and historical reality. There is no question of denying the asymmetry between the two. However, one must not proceed as if the two

[302] Jeremy Weate, 'Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony: Going Beyond the Text', *Research in African Literatures*, 34 (2003), 27-41 (pp. 30-31). Weate acknowledges the existence of Mbembe's attempt at finding a new writing about Africa, but argues that Mbembe's lack of theoretical coherence represents the failure of this project.

[303] Coronil, 89-108 (p. 91).

symbolic systems do not contribute to the *configuration* of reality'.[304] Indeed, to do justice to Mbembe's project, these displacements through different forms of intelligence and argumentation need to be seen as deliberate.

This point was rightly underlined by Michael Syrotinski, who argues in *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial* (2007) that 'we cannot separate the *conceptual* register of Mbembe's writing, with all of its polemical insights in the politics of the African postcolony, from the furiously expressive *poetic* quality of his language'.[305] Syrotinski has thus offered an extensive analysis of the close intertextual relation between Mbembe and Sony Labou Tansi, which also appears in many of Mbembe's other texts. According to him, 'Mbembe's use of Sony […] is clearly more than just a literary exemplification or allegory of a socio-political reality', and in fact '[Mbembe] seems to aspire, in terms of both subject matter and style, to Sony [Labou Tansi]'s writing'.[306] Syrotinski goes on to offer a joint analysis of Mbembe's and Sony Labou Tansi's writings and situates them within a similar project, which he terms 'writing Africa':

> "Writing Africa" as a radically inventive act is, for both Sony and Mbembe, neither a matter of representational adequacy, nor a celebration of artistic and expressive transgression as a vehicle for counter-hegemonic political contestation. [...] Mbembe's (and Sony's) "writing" could thus be said to be deconstructive to the precise extent that it reaffirms a radical commitment to the future of postcolonial Africa, at the very moment when all else seems lost.[307]

As the parentheses '(and Sony's)' suggests, Syrotinski's argument ends with the amalgamation of the two figures of Mbembe and Sony Labou Tansi into a same poetic project. This is supported by Syrotinski's convincing analysis of the convergences between the two authors:

> so many of Mbembe's major themes are dramatized in Sony's novels […]: the power of tyrannical potentates taken to absurd extremes; their literally cannibalistic, even *omnivorous* appetites; the grotesque or carnivalesque nature of government in postcolonial

[304] Mbembe, 'Prosaics of Servitude', 123-145 (p. 134).

[305] Michael Syrotinski, *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 112.

[306] Ibid., pp. 112 and 111.

[307] Ibid., p. 115.

> African states, as well as the ultimately futile opposition to this *commandement*; the conviviality of the relations between the dominant and the dominated….[308]

To this, Syrotinski adds that both authors not only show 'a shared dissatisfaction both with ontologically grounded discourses of authenticity, and with oppositional radical politics and their illusory promises of liberation' but that from a stylistic point of view, Mbembe's writing is also 'very close, performatively, to Sony's restlessly inventive language'.[309]

However, these similarities do not solve our initial problem, namely the asymmetrical relation to fictionality in Mbembe's text and Sony Labou Tansi's novels. Mbembe himself has described his relation to Sony Labou Tansi's writing as a 'silent wrestling', suggesting through this metaphor not only their close proximity, but also an underlying conflict.[310] Mbembe's 'Notes' come dangerously close to incorporating Sony Labou Tansi's universe, which would in turn mean getting engulfed in the fictional dimension of the novel. Syrotinski deftly circumvents this tension by arguing that 'As is also the case with Sony, "writing Africa" for Mbembe does not take the form of a socio-historical document, nor of a rhetorical political statement; neither is it escapist fiction, and even less "self-referential textualism" that is opposed to "life"'.[311] According to Syrotinski, Mbembe is instead writing 'from the perspective of a "half-life" or "half-death" or, perhaps, echoing Sony's preface to *La Vie et demie*, in "flesh passwords" ("en chair-mots-de-passe"), or in "those marks made by life alone" ("ces tâches que la vie seulement fait")'.[312] In appropriating Sony Labou Tansi's poetic phrasing to displace the generic alternatives he has just dismissed, Syrotinski extends the play of substitutions between the conceptual and the poetic that is performed by Mbembe and foregrounds the impossibility of containing Mbembe's project within one or the other of these categories. But this emphasis on the stylistic and thematic proximity between Sony Labou Tansi and Mbembe has perhaps led Syrotinski to

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[308] Ibid., p. 111.

[309] Ibid., pp. 111 and 113.

[310] Mbembe, 'A Brief Response to Critics', 143-178 (p. 151). See also his declaration that 'When it came to Africa, the crisis in the social sciences could be dealt with if the social sciences were to *work through, with, and against* the arts'. Hofmeyr, 177-187 (p. 179).

[311] Syrotinski, pp. 112-113.

[312] Ibid., p. 113.

overlook an important difference between the two texts. Indeed, in spite of the destabilization of generic distinctions performed by Mbembe's text, I will argue that these distinctions remain nonetheless crucial to the way the text comes to be received and interpreted, and that the 'Notes' and Sony's novels create very different forms of reading experience.

Even if one chooses to emphasize the paradoxical impulse toward referentiality that can be created by fiction, one still needs to bear in mind that this impulse emerges in relation to a number of generic expectations that are likely to differ from the ones that appear in the reading of a text identified as non-fictional. The experience of reading tends to exceed the norms and rules that are supposed to define it, but the nature of this experience, including its excess, is nonetheless shaped by these same norms. Thus, the preface to *La Vie et demie* that Syrotinski quotes from has been much discussed for its play with referentiality, especially in this passage which denies its link with Africa's real situation, perhaps in order to emphasize it even further:

> *La Vie et Demie* devient cette fable qui voit demain avec les yeux d'aujourd'hui. Qu'aucun aujourd'hui politique ou humain ne vienne s'y mêler. Cela prêterait à confusion. Le jour où me sera donnée l'occasion de parler d'un quelconque aujourd'hui, je ne passerai pas par mille chemins, en tout cas pas par un chemin aussi tortueux que la fable.[313]

But whatever referentiality this passage may be creating or disowning, the fictionality of the text is strongly asserted through the mentioning of the 'fable', and if the novel can be linked to reality, it is only via the uncertainty and irony that are created by its positioning as a fiction. This creates a very different set of expectations for the reader from the ones that arise from a reading of the 'Notes', which reproduce the conventions of social sciences, with their footnotes, quotations, and theoretical apparatus – elements which are as much part of the aesthetics of the text as its 'poetic' exuberance, and which suggest a different relation to factual truth.

The initial location of the 'Notes' within the field of social sciences is indeed central to the experience created by the text. For instance, in his review of *De la*

[313] Sony Labou Tansi, *La Vie et demie*, p. 10.

postcolonie, Marcel Kabasele describes the reading of the book as a process of 'bewitchment', which, according to him, is to be attributed to the aesthetic qualities of Mbembe's writing: 'Dans son écriture, la phrase se fait art ou, mieux, image et magie au point où le texte lui-même finit par participer d'un procès d'envoûtement'.[314] Kabasele insists on Mbembe's rupture with 'positivist social sciences' and on the fact that the text operates at the level of belief rather than reason:

> [les lecteurs] se laissent entraîner par l'extraordinaire puissance des mots et oublient d'interroger le bien-fondé des arguments de l'auteur. La raison en est que l'écriture de Mbembe est en elle-même un art de la représentation. Elle crée à elle seule un monde auquel l'on peut choisir de croire ou non. De mon point de vue, en cela réside la puissance et l'originalité de cet auteur: sa capacité à sortir le lecteur du champ de la raison pour l'installer dans celui de la croyance.[315]

But if we pay closer attention to Kabasele's description of this reading experience, it appears that the 'belief' Mbembe manages to produce is still dialectically linked to the modes of scientific discourse it subverts: the notion that the reader 'forgets' that he should be examining the accuracy of the argument, and the movement from belief to reason sketched out in the last sentence ('sortir du champ de la raison') imply that the experience is not simply a 'magical' hallucination performed by the text but occurs within a context of interpretation that was originally marked by the referential conventions of social science.

Some sympathetic critics have however attempted to focus on the aesthetic qualities of Mbembe's work and to read it as literature, thereby neutralizing the criticisms elicited by its epistemological inconsistencies. For instance, in a review of *De la postcolonie*, the historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch refers to Mbembe as a writer and a poet, celebrates his 'superb' writing, and applauds the fact that in the book 'La langue devient instrument d'analyse' (an intriguing phrasing that is quite revealing of the heterogeneity between language and thought that is

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[314] Marcel Kabasele, 'Après Fanon: commentaires sur l'ouvrage de Achille Mbembe', *H-Africa*, 2001 <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-africa&month=0108&week=d&msg=FgHksH1UAsxscNtLd8ZmLA&user=&pw=> [accessed 23 May 2010].

[315] Ibid.

presupposed by her argument).[316] But this also leads her to downplay the referential dimension of *De la postcolonie* and even to deny that it offers a depiction of the reality of Africa: 'Le texte est lucide et décapant, mais il révèle davantage un état d'esprit qu'un constat scientifique. Il instruit au moins autant sur la personnalité de l'auteur – déchirée, multiple, insoluble et tragique – que sur l'Afrique'.[317] In doing so, and in confining the text to the topos of artistic self-expressivity, Coquery-Vidrovitch deprives Mbembe's project of a crucial, and constitutive dimension. Indeed, Mbembe's use of fiction and literature differs greatly from the many self-critical analyses of the social sciences that have explored their 'literariness' and 'fictionality' in order to question their own authority and objectivity. This attitude was, for instance, famously articulated by James Clifford in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* in 1986. The collection of essays gathered by Clifford analyses the growing prevalence of fiction and self-reflexivity in ethnography, and the evolution of the field away from the model of the natural sciences.[318] The works inspired by this evolution have tried to make visible their own determinations, which often translates into a form of self-consciousness and the adoption of autobiographical modes of writing – a tendency one also finds at work in V.Y. Mudimbe's reflexion, or in postcolonial theory (Gayatri Spivak being the example *par excellence*).[319] For instance, Clifford mentions the growing prominence of the ethnologist's 'fieldwork account':

> Variously sophisticated and naïve, confessional and analytic, these accounts provide an important forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues, epistemological, existential, and political. […] With the "fieldwork account" the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiography and the ironic self-portrait. The ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at centre stage.[320]

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[316] Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine, 'Review: De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 42 (2002), 602-605 (p. 602).

[317] Ibid., p. 605.

[318] *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[319] For a recent examination of this issue, with particular reference to Spivak, see Jane Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality: The Anxiety of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

[320] Clifford, p. 14.

But Mbembe's text enacts a much more ambivalent strategy. In fact, in his reply to the objections made to the 'Notes' in *Public Culture*, Mbembe expressed strong misgivings toward these self-critical postures:

> I have been summoned to reveal "from which vantage point" I speak. […] One would have thought that this old and tedious preliminary had lost its legitimacy as the excesses caused by the "narcissistic turn" (and its corollary, the exaltation of "me") are now evident. Having realized that "savages" exist only in our own fantasies, we are pushed more and more by the exoticism of a new genre to treat simultaneously the problems of the object and those of the researcher, to renounce an examination of the real, to privilege reversal on the self, self-analysis and autobiography.[321]

The 'Notes' are indeed very far from the self-reflexive model sketched out by Clifford, as is suggested by the enunciation of Mbembe's text, which is marked by the codes of scientific objectivity and distance: the use of the first person plural and the impersonal 'on'. In creating proximity between his own text and works of fiction, Mbembe is not trying to undermine his own claims to truth, but, more radically, asking us to consider how fiction can provide new resources in the production of knowledge.

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As readers of the 'Notes' we therefore find ourselves in the face of an apparent contradiction. Taking Mbembe's project seriously necessitates that we maintain a certain distinction between literature and social science: for the 'Notes' to be effective, we must suppose that some texts, including Mbembe's, are capable of referring to realities outside themselves and of producing a knowledge about these

[321] Mbembe, 'Prosaics of Servitude', 123-145 (pp. 124-126). Mbembe nonetheless agreed to give a few indications of his own supposed 'determinations', but highlighted among other things, the importance of his inscription in the North-American academy rather than his African 'identity':

> Africa is perhaps the domain where we are born or where we pursue our investigations. It is perhaps our primary material. But it is only accidentally the recipient or destination of our own productions. It is not necessarily Africa's systems of significance which determine the "scientificity" of our writing and the credibility of our discourses. Sometimes, Africa is only a pretext for our texts and our languages, since our texts are ultimately ordered by, and connected to, sets of interests we prefer not to define. In other words, the problem is not only the individual or personal ethics of the writer. It is also that of belonging to an institution which has its politics. And the latter are not necessarily African. Mbembe, 'Prosaics of Servitude', 123-145 (pp. 136-137).

realities that can be judged primarily according to its truth value. But if the text were read from this perspective, in which social science texts are not just fictions or indeterminate pieces of literature, Mbembe's text would not constitute credible scholarship, relying as it does on literary effects and fictional sources. Accordingly, a number of readings of Mbembe's work exhibit a tension, and sometimes even a conflict, between several levels of evaluation. For instance, in a discussion of the notion of 'postcolony', Adebayo Williams expresses his reservations about the over-generalizations that underpin the concept in Mbembe's 'Notes': 'If the hubris of postcolonial studies derives from the inflation of a local condition into a cosmic paradigm, the very idea of Africa as a massive, monolithic postcolony must be one of the comforting illusions of contemporary theories of African cultural, economic, and political production'. [322] Yet Williams adds a few lines later that 'as a trope, the postcolony is profoundly illustrative of the African condition in the epoch after the cessation of actual colonization'.[323] In this distinction between the descriptive and metaphorical dimensions of the concept of the postcolony, we find again the different levels at which the text asks to be read: a descriptive one and a metaphorical one, a scientific one and a literary one.

A particularly interesting depiction of these contradictions and of the effect they may have on the reader's experience of the text was offered by Ato Quayson, who describes the work of Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* as a 'conflation of "truths"':[324]

> And yet, curiously enough, the generalizations about the place of Africa in the Western imaginary, the shape and style of *commandement*, arbitrariness and the culture of impunity all seem, from the perspective of anyone conversant with the scholarly literature on Africa by both Africans and Westerners, quite true. But how is this seeming truthfulness discursively produced in *On the Postcolony* itself? Why is it that as a reader, I find myself assenting without question, even while sensing that some of the assertions could well be refuted? [325]

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[322] Adebayo Williams, 'The Postcolony as Trope: Searching for a Lost Continent in a Borderless World', *Research in African Literatures*, 31 (2000), 179-193 (p. 179).

[323] Ibid.

[324] Quayson, 151-165 (p. 163).

[325] Ibid., p. 161. Quayson places particular emphasis on the proximity between Hegel and a passage from Sony Labou Tansi's novel *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* on which Mbembe relies.

This passage offers an eloquent testimony to the unsettling effects of Mbembe's writing. Quayson's prudence and hesitancy ('curiously enough', 'seeming truthfulness'), as well as his insistence on the fact that he is an informed reader, who reads not only Western but also African literature about Africa, reveal the depth of his discomfort. The strange 'assent' that Mbembe's text manages to obtain from some of his readers inevitably raises the issue of its relation to reality: how can we explain the perceived capacity of the text to describe African realities when it breaks most of the rules that are supposed to establish its credibility?

Quayson's own hypothesis is that the perplexing 'truthfulness' of the text derives from a certain 'familiarity' in Mbembe's representation of Africa: 'the force of this persuasiveness lies in the fact that *On the Postcolony* cannot entirely escape reproducing intimations of the familiarity of Africa'.[326] Again, the choice of the euphemistic phrases 'intimation of the familiarity of Africa' (instead of, say, 'clichés') and 'cannot entirely escape reproducing' suggests a persistent uneasiness. To make his point, Quayson examines the similarities between Hegel's much reviled treatment of the continent, as analysed by Mbembe in Chapter 5 of *On the Postcolony*, and Mbembe's own description (which, incidentally, is inspired by Sony Labou Tansi's novel *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*), arguing that 'it is as if the structure of interlocution by which Hegel's intimations of the familiar are taken seriously as a point of refutation ends up producing a mirror image within Mbembe's text itself'.[327] This brings us back to the predicament of discursive 'déjà-vu' I first described in Chapter 1, and to Mbembe's attempt to escape it through the invention of a new writing. However, as this last section will show, we have not come full circle. If, as Quayson puts it, it is impossible to 'entirely escape' these previous discourses, Mbembe's text also suggests the possibility of experiencing these repetitions in a different manner. To illustrate this, I will focus on one of the central concepts of the 'Notes': the fetish.

A striking aspect of Mbembe's use of the 'fetish' is that it makes virtually no reference to the heavy theoretical baggage of the term, or to its previous uses by Freud, Marx, Comte, Hegel or the surrealists, to name but a few. Theoretical

[326] Quayson, 151-165 (p. 161).

[327] Ibid., p. 163.

references regarding the notion are scarce and only appear in footnotes. However, it is probably not a coincidence that Mbembe, in order to allegorize the operations of the postcolonial state, seized on a concept that has been so overinvested and repeatedly transformed. In fact, the concept of the fetish may be considered a prime example of the discursive saturation against which Mbembe was initially reacting. To understand this, a reading of the issue of the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* Mbembe recommends in one of his footnotes proves helpful. In the first article, 'Fétiches sans fétichisme', Jean Pouillon argues that 'l'histoire de cette notion est celle de malentendus, d'oublis, et de glissements de sens, mais les glissements de sens ont aussi un sens'.[328] He then traces back the origin of the term to the Portuguese *fetisso* or *feitizo* and defines it as: 'le culte des choses inanimées, ou plutôt, qui sont, pour nous et en vérité selon nous, inanimées, mais qui sont, pour le sauvage et à tort, douées d'une force mystérieuse. Ou encore le fétichisme est la négation de l'écart entre l'objet et ce dont il est le véhicule'.[329] This definition fits well with Mbembe's idea that the characteristic of the postcolonial state is to 'institute' itself and to impose its own meanings in the bodies and minds of its subjects, without tolerating any form of mediation. Pouillon also suggests that the notion of fetishism was in large part a projection of the Portuguese colonizers onto the practices and cults they were observing, contending that it was a way to attribute to the 'savages' the very confusion they were afraid of for themselves:

> le catholique portugais qui ne voyait pas de difficulté à affirmer la présence de son dieu dans l'hostie sans dire pour autant que ce dieu était l'hostie même, répugnait à prêter au 'sauvage' la même capacité d'abstraction […] Dans cette hypothèse le fétichisme des 'nègres' aurait été surtout celui que les découvreurs chrétiens de l'Afrique, du fait de leurs propres croyances, redoutaient inconsciemment pour eux-mêmes. [330]

The process of projection and misinterpretation that presided over the constitution of fetishism as a concept was explored at length in William Pietz's series of papers on 'The Problem of the Fetish', to which Mbembe also refers in his notes.[331] Pietz

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[328] Jean Pouillon, 'Fétiches sans fétichisme', *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 1970, 135-147 (pp. 136-137).

[329] Ibid., p. 137.

[330] Pouillon, 135-147 (p. 137).

[331] William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1985, 5-17; William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish', *RES: Anthropology and*

argues that the notion is 'proper to neither West African nor Christian European culture' but a truly intercultural concept, born from mutual incomprehension and heavily influenced by European colonizers' own anxiety about the issue of idolatry.[332] According to Pietz, the 'fetish' was a 'middleman's word', elaborated in the context of the trade relations that European merchants visiting the West coast of Africa were trying to establish with Africans. The discrepancy between the merchants' 'rational' theory of value and that of Africans was explained by 'the African's supposed irrational propensity to personify material (...) objects, thereby revealing a false understanding of natural causality' and their supposed 'attribution of causal relation to random association'.[333] The structure of fetishism was progressively used to explain African societies in general and came to represent the very opposite of enlightenment:

> Fetishism thus represented a principle of social order based on an irrational fear of supernaturally caused death rather than a rational understanding of the impersonally just rule of law. It therefore revealed the true political principle (always supplemented by arbitrary despotic violence) that governed all *unenlightened* societies, since ignorance about the workings of physical causality – the very definition of a mentality lacking "enlightenment" – provided the ground of religious delusion necessary for this system of social obligation to work. As a fundamental principle of both individual mentality and social organization, fetish worship was the paradigmatic illustration of what was *not* enlightenment.[334]

If we follow Pietz's argument, the fetish was therefore crucial in constructing the image of Africa as a radically uncivilized and despotic space, and Laura Mulvey has even suggested that 'the concept and discourse of fetishism has itself played an important part in justifying the colonization, exploitation and oppression of Africa'.[335] We need to remember also that the use of the word in later theories, notably by Freud or Marx, was a form of ironic gesture, consisting in applying to Western societies a concept which had been created to describe the uncivilized and

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Aesthetics, 1987, 23-45; William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa: Bosman's Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1988, 105-124.

[332] Pietz, II, 23-45 (p. 24).

[333] Ibid., p. 23.

[334] Pietz, IIIa, 105-124 (p. 106). Nb: Mbembe's notes only refer to the first two articles of Pietz's series.

[335] Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 126.

irrational beliefs attributed to African people.[336] By reimporting the concept into his own depiction of African postcolonial regimes, Mbembe seems to be adding a new layer of irony, with extremely ambiguous effects.

Maybe this could explain, following Quayson's approach, why Mbembe's analysis 'rings true': just as the 'domestication' of the fetish corresponded to a mutual paralysis of the dominated and the dominant in the postcolony, the fetish may also be the theoretical point at which Mbembe's attempt reaches a state of conceptual 'conviviality' with colonial discourses about Africa. Such anxieties concerning Mbembe's potential complicity with (neo-)colonial representations of Africa were raised by several commentators, notably Judith Butler, whose review of the 'Notes' starts with the question of whether Mbembe's heavy reliance on French theory might not constitute a form of intellectual 'recolonization':

> can Foucault and Bakhtin be used to describe the postcolonial situation, given that they theorize from within the colonial discourse of France and represent what some might see as a further expression of colonial hegemony? To use such theory to describe postcoloniality may well constitute a *re*colonization of the postcolony, and ought this to be the direction for social and political theory?[337]

As Michael Syrotinski suggests, such a conflation of French theory with French colonialism is questionable (as is the implication that Bakhtin is a French theorist).[338] Not only does it ignore how a critique of colonialism has explicitly or implicitly informed the work of French theorists, but it also reproduces the assumption that national or racial identity determines the political meaning of a work. However, in her answer to her own question, Butler offers an engaging hypothesis by comparing the paradoxical subversions of the postcolonial subject described by Mbembe to the operations of the text itself: 'I would suggest that this kind of recapture of power, this subversion in and through ratification, might be read as part of Mbembe's own textual strategies in the "citing" of the French theorists, in the reworking and rearticulation of their theoretical apparatus'.[339]

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[336] Ibid., p. 2.

[337] Judith Butler, 'Mbembe's Extravagant Power', *Public Culture*, 5 (1992), 67-74 (p. 67).

[338] Syrotinski, p. 107.

[339] Butler, 67-74 (p. 68).

Butler then suggests that Mbembe's description of the postcolonial subject could be used to describe Mbembe's own theoretical enterprise and quotes the following passage of the 'Notes' as an illustration:

> faced with this plurality of legitimizing rubrics, institutional forms, rules, arenas, and principles of combination, the postcolonial "subject" mobilizes not just a single "identity," but several fluid identities which, by their very nature, must be constantly "revised" in order to achieve maximum instrumentality and efficacy as and when required.[340]

The mobilization of 'a plurality of legitimizing rubrics', and the quest for 'maximum instrumentality and efficacy' offer a very apt depiction of Mbembe's own writing and of its ability to situate itself on a multiplicity of epistemological levels, not as a way to undermine its own authority, but, on the contrary, as a strategy to reinforce its own power of conviction by escaping the constraints of each of the discourses from which it borrows. This doubling of the text by itself opens the possibility for a translation of the conceptual aspect of the text into an analysis of its poetics, and in this perspective, it is not clear any more whether the concept of the fetish seeks to represent African realities, or whether this representation is used as a way for the text to describe its own strategies, or again if it is only meant as a parody of previous representations of Africa.

Although Butler's argument regarding the homology between the object described in the text and the text's own construction offers an important key to the 'Notes', what I would like to consider now is rather how our reading of Mbembe's text could take us beyond the mutually reinforcing alternatives of the parody.[341] My

[340] Quoted in Butler, 67-74 (p. 69). This passage does not appear as such in the other versions of the text. The version published in *Africa* and *On the Poscolony* reads instead: 'Furthermore, subjects in the postcolony have also had to have a marked ability to manage not just a single identity for themselves but several, which are flexible enough for them to negotiate as and when required' Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', 3-37 (p. 5); *On the Postcolony*, p. 104.

[341] My argument does not engage directly with Judith Butler's own discussion of fetishism in Mbembe's text, as it is only marginally relevant to the point I am trying to make. Butler first uses the concept to draw attention to the disavowal of the feminine that she regards as central to the postcolonial state's obsession with virility: 'With or without Freud, however, we can ask whether the fetishization of orifices and genital organs can be understood apart from their relation to gender; indeed, can the very meaning of defilement be dissociated from feminization?' Butler, 67-74 (p. 70). She later comes back to the notion in order to suggest that a deeper engagement with the colonial origins of postcolonial power could more efficiently 'displace' the claims of the postcolonial fetish-state and break with the cycle of contestation/reinstitution that characterizes the relationships between the ruler and the ruled: 'if the vulgarizing of the law does not displace it, but happens in the course of its re-fetishization and re-enhancement (...), it may be that we might displace the fetish through some

contention is that there is yet another possible interpretation of the fetish, one that would not place the emphasis on what the text reproduces or refutes, but on the experience it creates. At this point, I would like to come back not to Quayson's argument, but to his hesitation. The paradoxical nature of his question, 'Why is it that as a reader, I find myself assenting without question, even while sensing that some of the assertions could well be refuted?', is reinforced by the apparent self-contradiction that consists in questioning one's own incapacity to question. This may remind us of the 'I know, but all the same...' that is often used to describe the mental process of the fetishist in Freudian theory.[342] This echo is worth signalling if we consider its implications for the opposition between knowledge and belief that founds the colonial idea of the fetish. In *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Laura Mulvey deconstructs this opposition and describes how her inquiry has led her to evolve from a conception of the fetish 'as a psychological and social structure that disavowed knowledge in favour of belief', to a new understanding of the notion as a structure that 'can maintain knowledge and belief simultaneously'.[343] According to Mulvey, 'The fetish object acts as a "sign", in that it substitutes for the thing thought to be missing, the maternal penis' and therefore also 'functions as a mask, covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of absence'.[344] But Mulvey points out that this disavowal is always incomplete, because the fetish simultaneously contains a knowledge of the sexual difference it seeks to hide: 'The fetish object also commemorates. It is a sign left by the original moment of castration anxiety and is also a mark of mourning for the lost object. The fetish as sign includes, therefore, even in its fixated belief in the female penis, a residual knowledge of its

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more thorough exposure of its genealogy' Butler, 67-74 (p. 73). She thus criticizes Mbembe for his failure to contest the state-fetish's disavowal of its own origins, calling for a discussion of how 'the vocabulary of the *commandement*'s self-production and self-aggrandizement itself replays, recaptures, reinscribes the simulations of racialized sexuality commanded by colonial imposition of power' Butler, 67-74 (p. 73)). But strikingly, Butler's argument, which limits itself to a Freudian understanding of the fetish, pays little attention to the colonial origins of the concept – it is perhaps revealing that her article derives the word directly from the Latin 'facera', without referring it back to the Portuguese and colonial etymology analysed by Pouillon and Pietz. This leads her to ignore the ironic link with colonial representations of African societies that Mbembe establishes in borrowing the concept, and which in fact seems to preclude the possibility of using the structure of fetishism to excavate the supposed origin of the postcolonial state. For a critical discussion of this aspect of Butler's article, see also Syrotinski, pp. 106-107.

[342] Mulvey, p. 14.

[343] Ibid., p. xi.

[344] Ibid., p. 5.

origin'.[345] A comparable coexistence of belief and knowledge, of which Quayson provides a telling example, is central to the contradictory experience created by Mbembe's text, in which the referentiality of the non-literary text and the 'suspension of disbelief' demanded by fiction constantly intersect. Mbembe's text is not just an endorsement or a parody of the colonial concept of the fetish: in creating the possibility for the reader of experiencing simultaneously what are usually understood as opposite modes of cognition, Mbembe disrupts the hierarchical opposition between (rational) knowledge and (fetishist) belief, which, according to Pouillon and Pietz, presided over the colonial elaboration of the fetish.

Crucially, this destabilization is not found within the internal structures of the text. It is only activated in the process of reading, and it is only through the interpretive difficulties experienced by the reader that the porosity between knowledge and belief comes to be revealed. Instead of espousing Mbembe's mystical celebration of the transformative power of metaphorical and poetic writing, my own analysis of the aesthetics of the 'Notes' has emphasized that these transformations happen at the intersection between the world represented in the text and the world of the reader, and that the relations between them are inescapably mediated by generic and disciplinary conventions, even (in fact, especially) in the case of a text that subverts these conventions. Thus, in reading Mbembe's text, we can catch a glimpse of connections and articulations which exceed the usual categories through which we usually link our world and its representations. But paradoxically, this transcendence is itself produced by the persistence, in the reader's mind, of the categorical distinctions it disrupts, between fiction and non-fiction, or literature and the social sciences. In his recent essay *Sortir l'Afrique de la grande nuit*, Mbembe suggests that African fiction offers a privileged medium of inquiry to retrieve a truth about Africa that still lies beyond the reality of violence. But this truth, Mbembe writes, 'has lost its name', which needs to be found again: 'C'est également cette ruine [Africa's 'originary ruin'] que la littérature portera à la fiction, arguant du fait qu'une vérité demeure au-delà de la violence, même si cette vérité a perdu son nom. Et c'est ce nom qu'il faut retrouver'.[346] In the end, perhaps

[345] Mulvey, p. 5.

[346] *Sortir de la grande nuit: essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), p. 79.

Mbembe's text should be understood as an invitation to experience, through the practice of reading, what this knowledge of Africa would feel like, if its name could be found, if we managed to escape the conceptual impasses of colonialist and Afrocentrist discourses, in order to invent a new institution, which would not conflate literature and the social sciences, but emerge from what has been both disavowed and produced in the institution of their difference.

Conclusion

In her famous 1975 essay 'Fascinating Fascism', Susan Sontag denounced the pervasive influence in contemporary American culture of what she described as 'fascist aesthetics'. Taking as her starting point a recently published photography book by Leni Riefenstahl, *The Last of the Nuba*, Sontag offered an exacting examination of what constituted for her not only the formal and thematic continuities of Riefenstahl's output throughout her career, but also the continuities between her art and her involvement with Nazism. Building on these points, Sontag argued for the existence of a fascist aesthetic which, according to her, appeared not only in Riefenstahl's most famous propaganda 'documentaries', *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*, but also in her early mountain films and later photographic work, as well as in a number of contemporary cultural manifestations and sexual practices, such as gay sado-masochism.[347] Fascist aesthetics, according to her essay, include a number of privileged themes (e.g. 'situations of control, submissive behaviour, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain'), figures and motifs ('the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force'), but also formal features, such as the alternation 'between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, "virile" posing'. The combination of these elements, Sontag contended, serves a distinctively fascist ideology as it 'glorifies surrender, [...] exalts mindlessness, [...] glamorizes death'.[348]

This assimilation of the aesthetics of Riefenstahl's films to Nazi ideology constitutes quite obviously a refusal of the notion of aesthetic autonomy: according to Sontag, the very conception of a film like *Triumph of the Will* 'negates the possibility of the

[347] Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Writers and readers, 1983), pp. 102-103. The article was first published in the *New York Review of Books* on February 6 1975.

[348] Ibid., p. 91.

filmmaker's having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda'.[349] In her analysis, aesthetics and the notion of aesthetic autonomy become a repository of political values and even a particularly insidious vector of ideological contamination, as they facilitate and even legitimate the circulation of fascist propaganda. This leads her to condemn in very harsh terms various attempts to rehabilitate Riefenstahl's work, which, according to her 'do not augur well for the keenness of current abilities to detect the fascist longings in our midst'[350] – although one may wonder about the keenness of Sontag's own abilities, since she admits a few pages earlier that 'if the book were not signed by Riefenstahl, one would not necessarily suspect that these photographs had been taken by the most interesting, talented, and effective artist of the Nazi era'.[351] 'Fascinating Fascism' thus stages an opposition between Sontag's own political interpretation of Riefenstahl's films and another position, attributed to 'the most influential voices in the avant-garde film establishment', which seeks to rehabilitate Riefenstahl in the name of aesthetics. For Sontag, any contention that Riefenstahl 'was always a beauty freak rather than a horrid propagandist' is in bad faith and irresponsible.[352]

This controversial argument was actually Sontag's second attempt to engage with Riefenstahl.[353] Her book *Against Interpretation* already included a few paragraphs on the topic and, crucially, in these pages, Sontag defended the exact opposite of her 1975 position. Sontag's early discussion of Riefenstahl appeared in an essay entitled 'On Style' (1964), which offered a particularly bold argument for the complete autonomy of the work of art, and contended that art should only be appraised according to its aesthetic value. The main point of the essay was to condemn what Sontag perceived as a persistent duality between style and content in the practice of art criticism, on the grounds that in talking about the 'style' of a work of art, one

[349] Ibid., p. 79.

[350] Ibid., p. 97.

[351] Ibid., p. 86.

[352] Ibid., p. 85.

[353] Some of the most controversial elements of this essay have been aptly summarized by Jeffrey Schnapp: 'There is much to object to in Sontag's (sometimes brilliant) polemic: its too simple equations between cultural and sexual dissidence, between fascism and sadomasochism, between "camp" and the fascist aestheticization of politics; its reductive analysis of contemporary mass culture; its tendency even to fall prey to fascism's self-mystifications'. Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Fascinating Fascism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31 (1996), 235-244 (p. 236).

cannot avoid implying 'that style is merely decorative, accessory'.[354] By contrast, Sontag defended the radical position that subject-matter is itself a stylistic convention, and that its function in art should be interpreted as purely formal: 'In art, "content" is, as it were, the pretext, the goal, the lure which engages consciousness in essentially formal processes of transformation'.[355] Riefenstahl was then bravely invoked as an illustration of this argument: 'To call Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympiad* [sic] masterpieces is not to gloss over Nazi propaganda with aesthetic lenience', Sontag wrote, because 'Through Riefenstahl's genius as a film-maker, the "content" has – let us even assume, against her intentions – come to play a purely formal role'.[356]

The contrast between these two positions is made even more striking by the fact that the texts seem to respond to each other, even though 'Fascinating Fascism' never acknowledges Sontag's previous argument. For instance, her assertion in 'Fascinating Fascism' that 'it is dishonest as well as tautological to say that one is affected by *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* only because they were made by a filmmaker of genius'[357] sounds like a direct rebuke to the sentence from *Against Interpretation* that I have just quoted: 'Through Riefenstahl's genius as a film-maker, the "content" has – let us even assume, against her intentions – come to play a purely formal role'. Comparably, in the first essay, Sontag warned: 'The Nazi propaganda is there. But something else is there, too, which we reject at our loss'.[358] The burden of that loss on the argument of 'Fascinating Fascism' becomes all too obvious when, while admitting that '*Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* are undoubtedly superb films', Sontag attempts to argue in the same paragraph that in spite of being 'the greatest documentaries ever made', they 'are not really important in the history of cinema as an art form'.[359] This puzzling turnaround was pointed out by Hilton Kramer in *The New York Times,* who described 'Fascinating Fascism' as 'one of the most important inquiries into the relation of aesthetics to ideology we have had in

[354] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 16.

[355] Ibid., p. 25.

[356] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

[357] Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, p. 96.

[358] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p. 25.

[359] Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, p. 95.

many years', before adding that 'the only really troubling aspect of its publication – so welcome in every other respect – is the author's refusal to acknowledge her own contribution to a phenomenon she now vehemently deplores'.[360]

Sontag's conflicting positions provide a good illustration for the two extremes between which my thesis has tried to navigate. The argument of *Against Interpretation* embraces a type of aestheticism that many politically committed critics would probably find not only irresponsible but actually untenable, while the argument defended in 'Fascinating Fascism', with its categorical insistence on the priority of political judgement over aesthetic appreciation, bears some similarities to the apparent privileging of political issues that characterizes a number of politicized approaches, such as postcolonial criticism. In the preceding chapters, my own response to this apparent dilemma has consisted in producing a series of readings that highlight the mutual embeddedness of the political and the aesthetic, emphasizing that aesthetic interpretations are situated within wider social and political contexts, and sometimes feed on the meanings and interpretations that they are supposed to transcend. This approach has revealed too how ethical or political judgments on art and literature are themselves shaped by aesthetic factors.

Throughout the thesis, I have adopted a rather sceptical stance towards the political import of critical interpretations, even when they are concerned with a theme as obviously political as dictatorship. I have suggested, after a number of recent interventions in the field, that one of the main challenges for the practice of postcolonial criticism is to rethink the articulation of its political and aesthetic concerns in more realistic terms. These issues were central to my discussion of Henri Lopes in Chapter 1, which laid out some of the contradictions and paradoxes that emerge from this mutual embeddedness of the aesthetic and the political. I explored these issues in the light of the particular context of postcolonial African dictatorships, focusing on the difficulty of finding new forms of thought and expression in a situation where both colonial and anticolonial discourses have been recuperated by oppressive regimes. This chapter drew an opposition between, on the one hand, an interpretation of the politics of Lopes's text based on textual evidence – in this

[360] Hilton Kramer, 'The Evolution of Susan Sontag', *The New York Times Book Review*, 9 February 1975, pp. 101-102.

instance, a reading which would attribute to its irony and distance vis-à-vis political commitment a liberating value in relation to the discursive deadlock I just mentioned – and, on the other hand, an examination of the actual political and biographical context of the text, in which this irony could take on a somewhat different meaning. However, I suggested that this contradiction could not be easily solved by restricting our inquiries either to the aesthetic aspects of the text or to its political significance, not only because the impulse towards extra-textual realities is crucial to the interest we take in many literary texts, but also because our reasons for discussing the politics of texts or their ideological effects derive from our pre-existing interest in these texts as aesthetic objects.

The following two chapters took this paradox further by showing how in practice, formal and political interpretations are constantly and inevitably intermingled in the way we interpret texts or films, even when we think that we are actually privileging either aesthetic or political/ethical readings. Thus, by analysing Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* in relation to the model of the 'roman à thèse' defined by Susan Suleiman, the second chapter highlighted how the 'literary' aesthetics of the text emerge precisely in the attempt to discern an explicit political message within it. Thus a broadly 'modernist' aesthetics that insists on polysemy, multiple meanings and ambiguity can only exist in opposition to a hypothetically straightforward and non-literary mode of interpretation, with which the text is implicitly compared, and to which it 'resists'. This, I suggested, complicates the opposition between political commitment and literariness which has often polarized discussions of African literature. Conversely, my examination of filmic representations of Idi Amin in the third chapter highlighted the tortuous ways in which apparently non-aesthetic judgments, such as political or ethical evaluations of films in which the question of historical accuracy seems especially pressing, are in fact inescapably influenced by aesthetic and generic conventions. I showed that the manner in which ethical/political responsibilities are often set against 'aestheticization' in discussions of violent political realities such as dictatorship is itself deeply entangled in historically and culturally produced aesthetic conventions.

In the course of my discussion, and particularly in the last two chapters, I have placed increasing emphasis on the notion of experience. My use of the notion is not

meant to create an opposition between, on the one hand, a supposedly 'spontaneous' or 'commonsensical' apprehension of texts, and on the other, a theoretical and intellectualized one, or between the 'ordinary' reader and the critic. On the contrary, the experiences I have discussed, and which have often been teased out of works of criticism, are immersed within complex processes of interpretation, and enabled by socially produced conventions and modes of perception. This appeared clearly in the last chapter, where my discussion of Achille Mbembe's 'Notes on the Postcolony' centred on how the complex aesthetics of the text induce a hesitation between an interpretation of the article as social science and an interpretation of it as literature, thereby troubling our perception of its referentiality and factualness. This last chapter attempted to foreground the productivity of the entanglements I have been examining, by showing how this hesitation between different modes of attention could produce new forms of knowledge. I also suggested that this might provide us with a way out of the alternative, described in the first chapter, between an account of postcolonial dictatorships that reproduces colonial notions of Africa as a despotic and violence place, and one that would fail to acknowledge that the emergence of these regimes calls into question the relevance of anticolonial and nationalist discourses. By situating the knowledge produced by Mbembe's text in the mixed experience of the reader, I have abstained from answering the question of its actual truthfulness or credibility, while simultaneously emphasizing the centrality of these concerns to the way we make sense of it. In doing so, I have thus displaced the initial alternative between, on the one hand, a reading that would simply judge the text on its accuracy or factualness and, on the other hand, a reading that would dismiss these considerations as irrelevant in the light of its aesthetic and literary qualities. Instead, I have focused on the way these two possibilities constantly intersect in the reading experience, in ways that are themselves conducive to meaning.

A similar displacement is also crucial to the way I have sought to re-articulate the dilemma I described in the Introduction, when I talked about postcolonial critics' difficulties in combining and reconciling their political and aesthetic concerns. Instead of mounting a case for or against the aesthetic, my arguments have suggested that it needs to be accepted as a constitutive part of the way films and literature are experienced and as essential not only to postcolonial criticism, but to literary/cultural

criticism more generally. One may share Bourdieu's distrust of the rhetoric of 'unknowability' and transcendence which has often been associated with aesthetic experience and has sometimes prevented the exploration of its conditions of possibility. One may accept that aesthetic experiences are neither universal nor natural, but shaped by 'the social conditions of the production (or the invention) and of the reproduction (or the inculcation) of dispositions and classificatory schemas which are activated in artistic perception'.[361] However, acknowledging the constructedness of our aesthetic experiences does not imply that they are not real; quite the contrary. Thus, even if we agree with, say, Terry Eagleton that the aesthetic is an ideology which, by valorizing the notions of autonomy and self-determination, 'provides the middle class with just the ideological model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations', the aesthetic is only able to perform these functions because it simultaneously appropriates and influences actual experiences.[362] These experiences may differ from the discourses that are usually used to conceptualize them; in particular, they may never be 'pure' of other interests (although the currency of this notion of purity necessarily has an influence on them); they nonetheless exist. Thus, in the case at hand, although it is very unlikely that in reading texts about African dictatorship, our attention will be fixed solely, or even primarily, on their 'formal features', our experience of these texts is nonetheless inextricably tied to the peculiar status ascribed historically and socially to those features.

Another implication of this approach is that I do not think one needs to endorse the classic discourses about the aesthetic in order to examine aesthetic experiences. In her book *Contingencies of Values*, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith suggested that the dominant conception of the aesthetic supposes a series of mutual definitions, in which 'aesthetic' refers simultaneously to the experiences elicited by works of art, to a class of objects which are identified as 'art' on the basis of their ability to create aesthetic experiences, and to a series of properties and qualities of these objects (typically, their 'form') that are said to be particularly conducive to aesthetic experiences:

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[361] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 288.

[362] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 9.

> following Baumgarten and early nineteenth-century usage as influenced by Kant, it ['aesthetic'] can [...] indicate a certain type of cognitive activity and/or sensory experience, specifically the type elicited by artworks either uniquely or among other things. At the same time, it can indicate a certain type of property of any object: specifically, the type of "purely formal" property which, according to Kant's analysis, uniquely elicits the sorts of experience which, if all else is in order, constitute genuine judgment of taste. A combination or conflation of these [...] senses issues in the familiar recursive use of the term to name certain types of experience and certain types of objects and certain types of properties of objects, so that "aesthetic" comes to be roughly equivalent to "relating to certain cognitive/sensory experiences, these being the ones elicited by objects that have certain formal properties, these being the ones that identify objects as artworks, these being the kinds of work that elicit certain cognitive/sensory experiences, these being...," and so forth around again.[363]

In Herrnstein-Smith's argument, this definition is inscribed within a critique of the discourse of aesthetic value, and its circularity invoked as proof of the inanity of traditional aesthetic claims (she describes her account as 'a parody, but not by much').[364] Yet, whatever judgement one chooses to pass on it, I would argue that the circularity Herrnstein-Smith emphasizes is nonetheless central to the way the aesthetic is commonly understood and indeed experienced.[365] Her account highlights what I consider a crucial dimension of the aesthetic experience: that the different poles of the aesthetic are closely linked to each other through a complex dialectic between subjective (but socially produced) modes of perception on the one hand, and characteristics of the artistic object or literary text on the other hand. What emerges from this, regardless of the consistency of the theories that are derided in this passage, is that at the level of experience, the aesthetic is neither an 'essential' property of the work of art, nor simply 'constructed' by the viewer or reader, but is both the product of a subjective response (informed by existing conventions and theories regarding art and literature) and a reaction to certain features of the object or text.[366]

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[363] Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 34-35.

[364] Ibid., p. 35.

[365] The circularity that is derided by Herrnstein-Smith is explicitly claimed by Peter de Bolla: 'What distinguishes affective or *aesthetic* experiences from others is the fact that they are occasioned by encounters with artworks. This proposes a mutual definition, so that what elicits *aesthetic* experience is an artwork and an artwork is defined as an object that produces *aesthetic* experience'. de Bolla, p. 9.

[366] Again my understanding of these issues is partly indebted to Mukařovský's account:

Such a focus on the experiential dimension of the aesthetic may help us move beyond what constitutes one of the most problematic aspects of the notion, namely the universalism that is often associated with it, and particularly with the Kantian conception of the judgment of taste.[367] As discussed in Chapter 3, in highlighting the situatedness of aesthetic experiences, I have emphasized that they will differ according to the historical, cultural or social background of the viewer or reader. It follows that the experiences depicted in this thesis are not necessarily representative of those of all readers or viewers. However, this situatedness and, more precisely, the conventional and social inscription of the aesthetic also implies, as I have already indicated, that these experiences are not purely subjective, and consequently, that a degree of generalization is actually possible from these specific, individual examples. Although the reluctance of critics, and particularly of postcolonial critics, to consider their own experiences as representative is often inspired by an eagerness to dissociate themselves from claims to universalism, it is on some level inconsistent with the idea that these experiences are not transcendent and universal, but shaped by institutional and social factors. Admittedly, as Rita Felski suggests in a recent discussion of the reading experience, the professional 'readings' of critics are subject to a vast number of constraints which do set them apart from other readers:

> the use of the term "reading" in literary studies to encompass quite disparate activities, from turning the page of a paperback novel to elaborate exegeses published in *PMLA*, glosses over their many differences. The latter reading constitutes a writing, a public performance subject to a host of gate-keeping practices and professional norms: a premium on novelty and deft displays of counter-intuitive interpretive ingenuity, the obligation to reference key scholars in

'1. The aesthetic is, in itself, neither a real property of an object nor it is explicitly connected to some of its properties. 2. The aesthetic function of an object is likewise not totally under the control of an individual, although from a purely subjective standpoint the aesthetic function may be acquired (or, conversely, lost) by anything, regardless of its organization. 3. Stabilizing the aesthetic function is a matter for the collective and is a component in the relationship between the human collective and the world. Hence any distribution of the aesthetic function in the material world is tied to a particular social entity. The manner in which this entity deals with the aesthetic function predetermines, in the final analysis, both the objective organization of objects intended to produce an aesthetic effect and the subjective aesthetic reaction to those objects'. Mukařovský, p. 18.

[367] Although contrary to what is sometimes implied, Kant does not claim that any given object should elicit a universal reaction or judgment, but that judging something 'beautiful' (as opposed to merely 'agreeable') means that we suppose in others a universal reaction similar to our own subjective response, which he describes as 'a claim to subjective universality'. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. by Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 43 §6.

> the field, rapidly changing critical vocabularies, and the tacit prohibition of certain stylistic registers.[368]

Nonetheless, as Felski notes, academic and non-scholarly interpretations, beyond their differences, 'share certain affective and cognitive parameters'.[369] Critics and non-critics alike read in ways that are shaped by cultural assumptions, generic norms, or aesthetic conventions, and not all these assumptions, norms and conventions will be limited to a given professional circle, or even to a specific cultural area.[370]

Using a variety of examples, I have therefore argued for the importance of integrating a complex and realistic notion of experience into critical discourse, particularly when it wishes to discuss the political implications of texts. Again, Sontag's hesitation over Leni Riefenstahl provides a good illustration of what is at stake. In spite of the radically opposed priorities they establish between political and aesthetic concerns, Sontag's two texts share common ground: both constitute (each in its own excessive manner) an attempt to evade the mixed and complex aesthetic experience elicited by Riefenstahl's films. In Sontag's earlier defence of Riefenstahl, this experience is described in the following terms: 'we find ourselves – to be sure, rather uncomfortably – seeing "Hitler" and not Hitler, the "1936 Olympics" and not the 1936 Olympics'.[371] The bracketing of Hitler and the 1936 Olympics by quotation marks represents graphically the process of detachment from the world that the exercise of aesthetic contemplation demands in Sontag's formalist argument, suggesting that Riefenstahl's 'genius' should insulate the representation from its referent in the real world. But then, one might ask, why are we 'to be sure, rather uncomfortable'? This admission, made in passing, suggests that the quotation marks may not suffice to protect us against our own referential impulses. Thus, throughout her essay, Sontag's argument comes up against its own impossibility. In her

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[368] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 14.

[369] Ibid., p. 14.

[370] On this issue, see Nicholas Harrison's article 'Who Needs an Idea of the Literary?', which emphasizes the 'literary-theoretical' nature of all readings of literature: 'Even when readers have turned to the literary texts for information, their attitude to them must have been influenced to some degree by their idea of the literary, an idea communicated to them through education, literary criticism, and literature itself. All reading of literature, as literary theorists have always insisted, is literary-theoretical in that sense'. Nicholas Harrison, 'Who Needs an Idea of the Literary?', *Paragraph*, 28 (2005), 1-15 (p. 7). On the influence of literature itself in shaping these expectations, see also Felski's discussion of the experience of 'recognition'. Felski, pp. 23-26.

[371] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p. 26.

description, a truly aesthetic experience necessitates the repression of a variety of concerns of a cognitive, sensual, or moral order, while the reaction she advocates must be 'detached, restful, contemplative, emotionally free, beyond indignation and approval'.[372] But in each of her attempts at conveying this experience, the repressed impulse toward reality and extra-aesthetic judgments still lingers: 'Approving or disapproving morally of what a work of art "says" is just as extraneous as becoming sexually excited by a work of art. (Both are, of course, very common)'.[373] This 'impurity' of the aesthetic experience which, in the 1964 text, is evacuated as a failure on the part of the spectator (albeit an inevitable one), becomes, in 'Fascinating Fascism', the main ground on which the films and their defenders are condemned:

> The ironies of pop sophistication make for a way of looking at Riefenstahl's work in which not only its formal beauty but its political fervour are viewed as a form of aesthetic excess. And alongside this detached appreciation of Riefenstahl is a response, whether conscious or unconscious, to the subject itself, which gives the work its power.[374]

The referential movement that was downplayed in the first text is this time openly denounced as the hidden source of the work's aesthetic appeal, and the incapacity of the spectator to attain the ideal of 'detached appreciation' leads Sontag to refuse outright the possibility that the viewer might escape the effects of the films' propaganda.

What emerges from the juxtaposition of Sontag's two texts is that beyond their different appreciation of the hierarchy between politics and aesthetics, both are haunted by a discrepancy between the actual experience of watching Riefenstahl's films, and a conception that defines the aesthetic as pure detachment and enjoyment of form. This is explicitly acknowledged in the 1964 essay, where Sontag writes: 'Of course, we never have a purely aesthetic response to works of art'.[375] But maybe this opposition between an imaginary, apparently unreachable, 'purity' of the aesthetic and the constant 'failure' of our actual reactions conceals what might otherwise be quite obvious: that this 'impurity', since it is inseparable from the 'aesthetic'

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[372] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p. 27.

[373] Ibid., p. 26.

[374] Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, p. 95.

[375] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p. 23.

experience, must in fact be part of it. It seems undeniable to me that if we enjoy watching *Triumph of the Will*, we are also enjoying something else, which has to do with the subject it represents, and with the negative fascination it may exert. However, it is one thing to admit that in responding to the film's aesthetics we also respond to 'the subject itself', or that 'Hitler' necessarily directs us towards Hitler, and quite another to identify what the relation between them actually is and what effects it may have.

It is precisely in relation to such issues that the work of criticism can make a distinctive contribution, by offering us a better understanding of the nature of our aesthetic experiences, and of the different, even incommensurable, investments that we place in them. Although I have expressed scepticism towards Sontag's moralizing stance, I am not arguing that we should simply give in to the potential confusion that sometimes characterizes these experiences. On the contrary, the role of criticism is to offer new insights into the various assumptions and conventions that shape our experiences, sometimes to question our intuitions and impulses, but also to highlight, as I tried to do in the last chapter, how they can provide us with new forms of understanding. What can be achieved by focusing on these issues may always sound secondary, if not irrelevant, compared to the urgency of the various predicaments that are often depicted in postcolonial texts – although, after focusing on dictatorship, one may perhaps feel more inclined to value the idea that not all experiences and activities need to be justified politically. Ultimately, what critics need to reengage with is the value of the aesthetic experience itself, and this, as I have suggested, cannot be adequately conceptualized either in terms of political usefulness or of established aesthetic hierarchies.

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